Sociology of Religion

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

third edition

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Studying Religion

We want to differentiate the sociological approach to religion clearly from important philosophical questions. The existence of God, immortality, good and evil, and so on are vital issues for many people, but they are not central to the sociological enterprise. God may or may not exist. People believe differently about life after death. Ethical debates bring out the best and worst in human thought. Nevertheless, for the sociological study of religion what matters is not whether God exists or whether the soul is immortal or how evil comes to be defined, but the fact that people act on beliefs that God does or does not exist, that there is or is not life after death, that evil is or is not a real power operating in the world. This does not mean that sociologists of religion themselves have no personal religious convictions; many of us do. But our interest in doing the sociology of religion is to see how people's beliefs work themselves out in relation to "lived experience"—that is, how we conduct our lives in this world.

Why Study Religion?

You may have had any number of reasons for taking a course in the sociology of religion: personal curiosity, course requirements, professorial popularity, scheduling ease. Rational choice theory, about which you will soon learn more, would accept the legitimacy of any of these. From a broader perspective, however, other reasons make the study of religion as important today as it has ever been.

Although the social scientific study of religion was somewhat marginalized from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, a sea change began in 1979, as sociologist of religion N. J. Demerath III (1994) has pointed out. That year recorded

- the "mass suicides" of more than nine hundred people in Jonestown, Guyana, that focused attention on the "cult" phenomenon;
- the high-gear mobilization of the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority as a part of the 1980 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan, which began the appearance of the Christian Right as a significant force in political discourse in the United States;
- the election of Pope John Paul II and his internationalization of the papacy through visits to both Latin America and especially his native Poland—the

first real entry of the papacy into what was then Soviet-controlled territory; and

- the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini to power in Iran and the taking of American hostages at the U.S. embassy there.

The Iranian situation and all that followed in its wake throughout the Middle East are of signal importance because it so visibly and directly confronted the reigning secular worldview of Western political science.

By 1994, for example, David L. Miller of Syracuse University, at the time of his nomination to the presidency of the American Academy of Religion, could observe that "eighty percent of organized terror and violence [throughout the world] is being performed in the name of some religious (or putatively religious) ideology or myth, some religiosity or theologism. . . . [R]eligion is now a force in the world, in ways not predicted, and in some cases not welcomed" (1994). And later in the decade, when Martin E. Marty, the preeminent historian of American religion, listed ten reasons for studying religion, his first was this: "Religion motivates most killing in the world today" (1997: 20). You may find this to be a sad fact or a fact not likely to be proclaimed from the pulpits of the nation's religious institutions as standard weekend fare, but it is a fact that must be considered by sociologists and can be ignored only at the price of future suffering. More Christians, for example, are probably suffering martyrdom or persecution for their faith today than at any time in history. Of course, this is partly a result of the population explosion—there are more people, hence more Christians, hence more martyrs in real numbers—and partly cultural, as Christianity ventures out of its European domain into Africa and Asia. The Holocaust, however, should still be a live recollection of the possibilities for evil that religious prejudice may generate, even in the midst of "culturally advanced" societies. In short, whether or not we like religion, whether we are or are not ourselves religious, we need to understand what it is about religion that mixes with other human emotional dynamics to produce results that are so at odds with the peaceful teachings that seem to be at the core of all the world's religions. As we will see, globalization theory in sociology is a helpful tool in assessing these contemporary dynamics.

Marty offers nine other reasons for studying religion, too, several of which are particularly important to the sociology of religion. Right after the assertion that "[r]eligion motivates most killing in the world today," he observes that religion also "contributes to most healing in the world today." From pastoral counseling to primitive shamanic rites, to many of the world's great medical centers, religion directly or indirectly is involved in the restoration of relationships and the healing of both mind and body. Increasing research on holistic health and wellness shows the importance of spiritual well-being, not only to mental health but to physical health as well (Blasi 2011; Ellison and Hummer 2010; Levin 1994; Levin and Koenig 2005).

Religion, Marty points out, is also "globally pervasive; there is a great deal of it." The more our world becomes "a single place," to return to Roland Robertson's phrase (1992), the more important it is to understand the role of religion in cultures. In addition, however, even in the United States, the effect of greater world openness has been that the variety of religions available has increased; the

Producing the Sociology of Religion

The primary producers of the sociology of religion are academic researchers based at universities and seminaries. They may be located in a department of sociology or a department of religious studies. There are also independent scholars who have sustained a disciplined program of research and publication in the field through long careers, as well as researchers who work primarily in applied settings. These men and women communicate with each other primarily through a group of professional associations that hold regular meetings and through the journals that these associations produce.

Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review is the official journal of the Association for the Sociology of Religion (ASR). It is the only English-language journal devoted exclusively to the sociology of religion. *Sociology of Religion* began its career in 1940 as the *American Catholic Sociological Review* and moved gradually to an exclusive focus on the sociology of religion in the 1960s. From time to time issues of the journal are also published as freestanding volumes for larger circulation. The ASR also sponsors an annual topical series, *Religion and the Social Order*, and provides various forms of financial assistance for the pursuit and publication of research, particularly the Joseph H. Fichter Research Grants. The ASR meets each summer at the same time and in the same city as the American Sociological Association (ASA). A major feature of the ASR meeting is the Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture, which is subsequently published in the journal. During the 1990s the ASA added a Section on the Sociology of Religion, which is now among the larger divisions of the association.
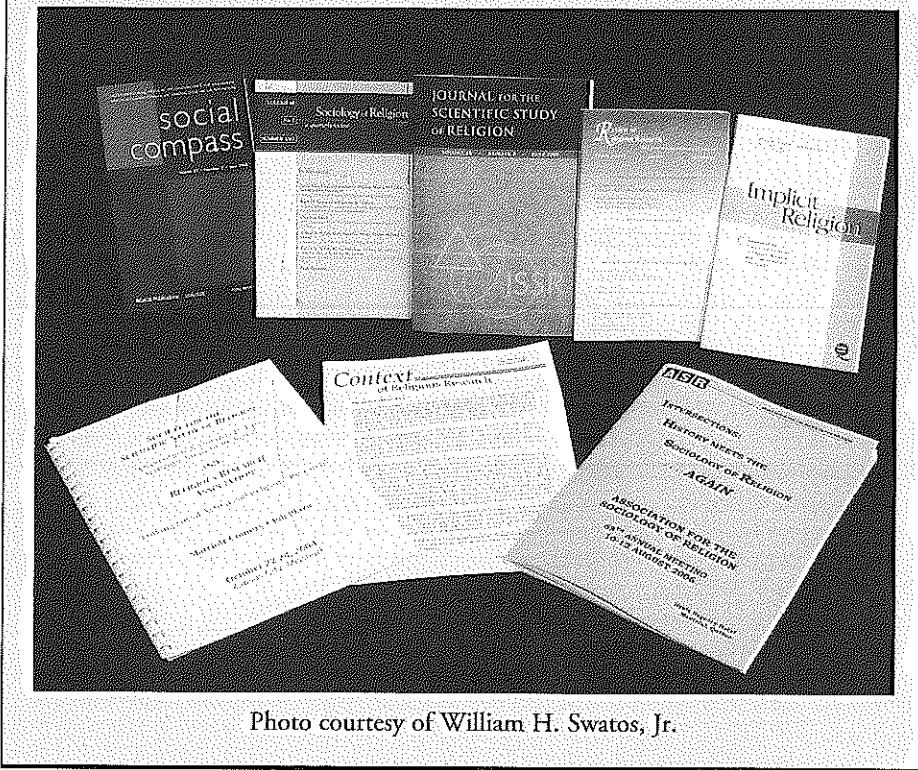
In the fall of each year, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) and the Religious Research Association (RRA) meet together. These associations are interdisciplinary, but sociologists of religion predominate among their members. They publish, respectively, the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (*JSSR*) and the *Review of Religious Research* (*RRR*). Historically, the image of the SSSR has been that it is more academic in its focus, while the RRA is more oriented toward application. This can easily be overstated, yet it is true that historically the commitment of the RRA has been to highlight the contribution of research to the various religious communities. Both organizations formally celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries in 1999. They, too, offer support for research projects, and the RRA's H. Paul Douglass Lecture is a biennial feature at their meetings.

Sociologists of religion also publish their work in the major journals of sociology as a whole: the *American Sociological Review*, the official journal of the ASA; the *American Journal of Sociology*; and *Social Forces*. In addition, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) has a number of subgroups whose interests dovetail with those of sociologists of religion—not least the Section on Religion and the Social Sciences and the Sociology of Religion Group—and sociological articles can be found from time to time in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* and in such other interdisciplinary journals as *Religion* and the *Journal of Church and State*.

The major association for the sociology of religion outside the United States is the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (whose most usual acronym is SISR, from the French version of the society's name). The SISR has a cooperative relationship with the journal *Social Compass* and meets biennially at locations around the world. Its history in many ways parallels that of the ASR. Sociology of religion also maintains a presence at the quadrennial meetings of the International Sociological Association (ISA) through its Research Committee 22–Sociology of Religion (RC22). RC22 is one of the oldest of the ISA's constituent research committees. Issues of the ISA's principal journals, *International Sociology* and *Current Sociology*, have made major contributions to the sociology of religion on a recurring basis. Especially attractive to English-speaking sociologists of religion is the Sociology of

Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association. This group has a multi-day meeting at a British university each spring, with additional single study days at other times of the year. It does not produce a journal, but selected presentations from each spring's meetings usually appear as commercially published books. Additional options for collegial meetings and for publication are available to those who are relatively fluent in other languages besides English, especially French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Most academic journals, association meeting programs, and newsletters are available online as well as in print versions, either under their own auspices or through commercial vendors. Recently the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* has appeared as a journal published solely online (www.religjournal.com). It remains to be seen how much in the future online publication will replace the traditional print journal as a source for the dissemination of research results. Currently, however, the primary virtue of online services seems to be the reduction of the need for storage space in libraries for back issues of journals.

Photo courtesy of William H. Swatos, Jr.

relative sameness of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" that characterized the United States in the 1950s has been broken again and again, not only by new religious movements (NRMs) but also by increasing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists entering the society. "Religion, however defined, helps explain many human activities," and it is "one of the most revealing dimensions of pluralism" (Marty 1997: 48).

Marty notes, as we might expect of a historian, that "[r]eligion has a long past," but adds that "its tentacles are culture wide." Put another way, not only is

there a history of religion, but religion has had a historical influence affecting many aspects of all cultures: Modern economics and science, as Max Weber (1998) and Robert K. Merton (1936, 1996), respectively, have pointed out, have been shaped by religious influences; so have education, medicine, and democratic governance (Woodberry 2012). But not only the particular ways in which these institutions have risen in the West have been religiously influenced, but also the way in which they failed to develop or actually receded in the East. Thus, to bring us almost full circle around where this chapter began, "[r]eligion gets to be studied because it is practical." Marty at this point deserves to be quoted at length:

> "[G]etting religion" refers to a very practical issue. People in statecraft have to plan strategies in case military action elsewhere might involve their country. Leaders of what we momentarily will call tribes do well to keep an eye on the rites and ceremonies, the myths and symbols and stories, of the tribe on the other side of the hill: it might be called upon by its deities or its dancers to attack.
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> On the domestic political scene, one need hardly elaborate on the practicality of understanding religion in the form of the putative Catholic vote, the various Christian coalitions, ever-changing Jewish interests, or what African American pastors are thinking. Advertisers blunder when they try to sell a project while being insensitive to the religious sensibilities of potential customers. Marketers include religious data when planning where to sell: hog butchers of the world, to take an obvious case, do not target Jewish communities.
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> In intimate personal relations, such as providing medical care, promoting support groups in struggles against addiction, or making sense of the person to whom one is married, some understanding of religious impulses and religion is practical. Even the widespread religious indifference and ignorance in much of the culture demands study: if people abandon religion or are abandoned by it, academics get to study what takes its place. Something will. (Marty 1997: 48)

How Do We Study Religion?

Sociologists use a variety of methods to study social action. Some are more suited to the study of religion than others. For example, it is hard to conceive of many formal experiments that could be conducted with respect to religion. Some quasi-experiments (partial experiments) are possible, however. Let's say a massive evangelistic crusade is being conducted in an area. It might be possible to pass out leaflets in one community near the crusade site but not in another, and then count attendance from each area; this would test the effectiveness of leafleting. Or a third community could be added where telephone calls were used instead of leaflets. If the communities could be determined to be similar in terms of such characteristics as race, age, education, and socioeconomic status, then this would serve as a possible experimental setting for assessing these different communications techniques. As another example, in a relatively large religious gathering where people were divided into small groups to discuss a controversial topic, some of the groups

could be randomly designated to begin with prayer, while others were not. This would indicate whether prayer was an effective means of moderating conflict. Some religious people would be uncomfortable with such experimental structuring of religious life, however, and it is not clear that these kinds of questions are the most important to sociology of religion generally. Sociologists of religion have tended to use either some form of survey or a qualitative technique, such as interviews or participant observation, rather than experimental designs.

This raises, then, a second crucial point: namely, that decisions about what method(s) to use are best made in relation to the kinds of questions we want answered. Every sociological method has both limitations and promises for different kinds of inquiry; some methods are better suited than others to answer particular kinds of questions. Consider something like attendance: If you say you are "interested in studying church attendance," what is it precisely that you mean? Do you mean *how many* people attend a religious congregation across, say, a year? Do you mean *what* services attract the most people? Do you mean *how* attendance at worship has differed across time? Probably in all these cases you will want to use some form of *quantitative* data-gathering technique (that is, one that assesses and presents data primarily in numeric form). Or do you really mean you want to know *why* people attend religious worship or meetings? That kind of question is of quite a different character and is almost certain to require a *qualitative* technique (that is, one that presents data primarily in the form of narrative accounts).

Two subpoints here: First, it is essential to recognize that inferring "why?" answers from "how many?" data (or *vice versa*) is absolutely wrongheaded; second, to get at something approximating the truth, *both* kinds of data are necessary— that is, what we mean when we say "church attendance" probably includes elements of both "how many" and "why." Quantitative and qualitative research styles in themselves should be seen as primarily complementary rather than competitive. In order to determine most appropriately what kinds of methods we want to use, we need to ask ourselves not only "What kinds of data do we want?" but also "Why do we want them?"—that is, "What are we going to do with these data?" This latter question usually has either theoretical or practical aspects to it (and sometimes both), and we will turn to these issues later in the chapter.

Finally, before turning to specific methods, we need to say directly that research exacts costs—in time or money or both. No research simply happens. Hence, whatever research technique we are going to adopt is going to take time or money to execute. We may do it ourselves, hence it will be our own time, or we may hire someone else to do it, hence it will cost money. If it is our own time, however, there is also what economists formally term an *opportunity cost*, inasmuch as we could at least theoretically be doing something else that might bring direct financial benefit. Even using our own time there may be direct financial costs—for example, for printing questionnaires for a survey. Thus, whether we are planning our own research or evaluating the work of others, we must ask where the money is going to come from to execute the work and how likely it is to be achieved. Because of the separation of church and state in the United States, in particular, the kinds of public research money that might be available to other sociological subdisciplines are not as likely to be directly available for religious research. Some

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private foundations, such as the Lilly Endowment, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the John Templeton Foundation partially offset this loss, and not all projects involving religious research are absolutely excluded from public funding. One big gap in public information about religion in the United States, however, is created by the absence of questions about religion on the U.S. Census. Canada, which does include religion questions in its census, provides a helpful comparison case—although census data themselves must be very carefully interpreted. With this and the prior cautions in mind, we can now turn to principal research strategies in the sociology of religion.

SURVEY RESEARCH

A research strategy that has been used a great deal to study religion, particularly from the 1950s through the 1970s—and is still in use today, though preferably with greater caution—is the survey. People are usually either given written questionnaires or interviewed in person or on the telephone for answers that will fit into a fixed set of responses. It is, of course, possible to have more open-ended items using either a written or oral technique, but these are not the dominant mode in survey work.

Early research along this line often settled for simply asking people their religious preference and then relating this to a collection of other items on the interview schedule: presidential voting, socioeconomic status, sexual attitudes, racial sentiments, and so on. As time passed, sociologists became aware that religion is a *multidimensional* phenomenon, and that self-designated religious affiliation by itself is a relatively poor predictor of anything. Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark's *Religion and Society in Tension* (1965), which revised and extended Glock's initial exploration of this approach (1962), was a pioneering effort in this respect. At the very least, one has to ask questions about how frequently the individual participates in the tradition with which she or he indicates affiliation. Yet even here, recent research by C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves (1993; compare Chaves and Cavendish 1994; Hadaway and Marler 2005; Hadaway, *et al.* 1998; Marcum 1999; Marler and Hadaway 1999), who have actually counted people in churches over successive weekends, suggests that people *over-report* their religious participation in survey research. Questionnaires additionally may be influenced by class bias, as people who are not well educated may not be able to read and clearly understand the questions they are being asked, or they may have insufficient information to make meaningful choices.

Surveys also often create false dichotomies, as diverse responses over a five- or seven-point scale are collapsed into a simple two-way split when the data are actually analyzed. Consider, for example, two contributions published in a single collection: From the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS) data collected during the 1980s, Phillip Hammond, Mark Shibley, and Peter Solow (1995) and John Simpson (1995) both use the same question relating to homosexual relations: "What about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex—do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" Hammond and colleagues interpret the responses

Research on the Edge

In 1997, thirty-nine members of a group that called itself Heaven's Gate apparently willingly and calmly ate barbiturate-laced applesauce and pudding, thereby committing the largest mass suicide ever on U.S. soil. The media were largely dumbstruck, but the existence of this group in one guise or another had been documented in academic journals and essay collections—even in *Psychology Today*—for more than a decade by sociologist of religion Robert W. Balch, a professor at the University of Montana. His work suddenly was on journalists' required reading lists.

In an interview with writer Scott Heller of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Balch talked about how he became involved in this research:

> "[S]tumbling onto this U.F.O. cult pretty much reoriented my entire career." . . . [Balch] was a specialist in criminology when he first heard about the sect led by Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles, then known as "Bo and Peep" or "The Two." In 1975, Balch and a Montana graduate student traveled with believers from Arizona to California, where members of the group were to watch their leaders depart for the next world.
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> "I wasn't thinking of sociology. . . . I was just interested in what would happen when they reached California and the prophecy didn't happen."
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> Because members believed that attachments to mainstream society would keep them from the "transformation," Balch didn't identify himself as a sociologist. Instead, for two months, he posed as a new member, sleeping with the others in isolated campgrounds and depending on churches for money. If anyone asked, members said they were a Bible-study group on retreat.
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> "The people we observed generally kept to themselves, devoting their energy to overcoming their 'humanness,' so most of the time we had little trouble taking part in the group without committing ourselves." Keeping track of what they saw was another matter.
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> "We had to write our notes in bathroom stalls or get up before dawn when we could write while everyone else was still asleep."
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> Mostly "spiritual seekers" who had experimented with a number of other alternative faiths, members of the group were not so different from the college students Balch taught. . . . "Under other circumstances I could have seen becoming friends with them. . . . That made it very stressful."
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> His experience with the U.F.O. cult "was the only time I infiltrated a group," he says. "Even though I learned a lot that couldn't be learned any other way, I wouldn't do it again."

Source: Scott Heller, "Inside Heaven's Gate: A Sociologist Who Went Undercover," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 11, 1997, A10.

of "always wrong" and "almost always wrong" to indicate "family values." Simpson, on the other hand, treats only the response of "always wrong" to indicate what he terms a "conservative" orientation. Our point here is not to determine which of these two articles is "correct" but instead to show how the data are mobilized and interpreted in the presentation of these authors' results—and so the role of the researcher, rather than the participants, in determining an assessment of the meaning of the data. Of course, with a data set like the GSS, it is possible for another trained researcher to reassess these results by recomputing them, either subtracting or adding, respectively, the "almost always wrong" component.

Whether or not the general public is capable of performing these operations or grasping their significance is another question.

What is perhaps most important to understand about survey research strategies, however, as Ronald McAllister (1998: 417) points out, is that "[a]t the heart of them all is the asking and answering of questions." Whether a researcher is using a questionnaire she passes out or is doing telephone or face-to-face interviews from a schedule, the frame of likely or possible answers is always structured by the researcher. This methodological assumption presumes that the researcher understands sufficiently the action system under study to ask questions that are consonant with the meaning structures of the participant actors. If there is not a relatively close fit between the understandings of the researcher and the meanings of the participants, data can easily be misinterpreted. Because religions are systems of meaning and discourse, surveys in the sociology of religion must pay extremely close attention to these issues whenever the data being gathered extend beyond those of the simplest sort.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Increasingly, sociological research in religion is placing greater weight on forms of participant observation or field research, where researchers actually interact directly with subjects in their relevant lifeworlds. Traditionally, participant observation has been faulted because there is the temptation on the part of the researcher to "go native"—that is, to identify with his or her subjects to the point at which he or she becomes a partisan on their behalf. (Occasionally the opposite takes place, but it is the same loss of research objectivity.) Participant observation has other ethical considerations, both during the research and afterward, since researchers are supposed to operate under the scientific equivalent of the "seal of the confessional": The privacy of those whom they see and hear during their research is inviolate. Field research also generally takes longer to complete while supplying data on a much narrower sample base. Someone who wants a quick answer to a concrete problem is not likely to want to have a researcher spend eighteen months in the field and six months analyzing the data. In addition, ethnographic research often suffers from the "N = 1 problem": Because most ethnographic work is usually limited to one, or at most two, research sites (for example, a single congregation or community), it is impossible in many instances to know whether or how a study's results may be generalized.

The great value of participant observation, on the other hand, is that it allows the participant actors a much larger role in shaping the meaning context of the data (assuming the researcher has the necessary skills to use the data in this way). In particular it has the advantage of letting the researcher see the religious practice (or action) of participants, which is impossible to do with survey techniques, even if opportunity is given for open-ended response items.

Studies by Melinda Wagner (1990, 1997) and Susan Rose (1988) of independent Christian schools, for example, show that such putatively strict institutions as evangelical-fundamentalist schools and churches actually contain an array of

Religion as a Site

In the course of her year as chair of the American Sociological Association Section on the Sociology of Religion, Mary Jo Neitz, professor of sociology at the University of Missouri, Columbia, wrote a column for the section's newsletter in which she described some of the processes that brought her to the study of the sociology of religion. Because they are particularly rooted in the work of Geertz, this seemed to be a good place to share them with you.

I came to study religion incidentally, because it was a site for looking at something else. In an introductory sociology course I was teaching, I encountered born-again Catholics who claimed that all mental illness was caused by the devil (not a theory present in the discussion in our textbook), and I thought it would be an interesting context for looking at how people come to develop particular worldviews. For myself and many others at that time, religion—often in a new form, one of the new religious movements or charismatic forms within the older denominations—caught our attention: we saw sites for looking at social processes and organizational dynamics in which we had ongoing theoretical interests.

The Cultural Turn

For some of us, this was facilitated by the advent of new cultural approaches in sociology. Clifford Geertz's work, for example, not only proposed a frame for seeing religion as a cultural system, but perhaps more important, Geertz revealed how the analysis of popular expressive forms could be as significant and revealing as the study of high culture or official dogmas. New studies appeared examining faith healing and devotional practices, conversion and individuals' search for meaning in a changing society. A later generation pushed this further, identifying religious practices in contexts removed from formal religious institutions—among those grieving after the death of loved ones or among workers in soup kitchens. We learned to look at symbols as models of and also models for behavior. We became interested not only in how cultural forms reflect the social order, but also how culture plays a role in shaping social movements and organizational forms. Even the political clout of the Religious Right can be understood as part of a "culture war."

The cultural turn also helped to make visible religious forms and movements and organizations which had not previously been visible to sociologists. Sociologists began to examine the religious practices of spiritual seekers of all sorts, the efforts of new immigrants to make sense of the religions of their parents in new contexts, the particular ways that women engage and maintain religious cultures in the privacy of their homes, or create new religions in public spaces.

The Local and Particular

Another effect of Geertz's work was that it argued for the importance of "local knowledge." . . . Geertz argued for attention to the local and the particular context of whatever we were observing. Interpretivist ethnographers like myself found ourselves exploring ideas of narrative with comparative historical sociologists, and rethinking what we meant by a case study. . . .

And, of course, looking at the local and the particular also meant taking the religious context seriously. In the late 1980s, I remember being at the Stone Symposium, sponsored by the [Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction], and Carl Couch, who always argued for the importance of generic social processes, was criticizing a paper I had just given. Carl said to me, "but you don't really care about that religion stuff, do you?" Contrary to what I might

have answered a decade earlier at the start of my dissertation research, by this point I had to answer that I did care about religion itself. To the extent that religion is the "context" in which I do my work, the context matters.

Religion as a Distinctive Institution

Caring about religion itself—as an institution, as cultural systems, as social and cultural movements—led me to explore the work being done in the subfield of the sociology of religion. The conceptual tools developed there had particular usefulness in examining relations between religion and society. For example, while I was still critical of the model of secular change implicit in some theories of church, denomination and sect, I began to see those theories as offering an interesting way of conceptualizing deviance on a cultural level, and the relation between hegemonic denominational cultures and resistant and subversive subcultures.

I believe that my work, and indeed my understanding of American culture, has been much enriched by my movement from seeing religion as a site for studying the theoretical problems which interested me to seeing religious traditions themselves as sources of cultural forms that provide ongoing resources to individuals and institutions in the United States. In talking to other people about shifts in the sociological study of religion, I hear different interpretations of what has changed and how. Not everyone would agree with the emphasis on culture in the account I have presented here. Others, for example, move across bridges between institutional theory and denominational organizations, but they too find the particularities of the religious site to add to the complexity and depth of their analyses.

Source: Mary Jo Neitz, "From the Chair: What Is Distinctive about Studying Religion?" *ASA* [American Sociological Association] *Section on the Sociology of Religion Newsletter* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 1–3.

cultural contradictions and patterns of accommodation that hardly conform to what might be a simplistic view of an outsider that all members of these groups believe the groups' official ideologies; studies of some new religious movements have shown the same kinds of results. Hence, a simple survey question such as "Do you send your child to a Christian school?" does not allow us to interpret a positive answer as a sign that the parent necessarily accepts the full theological system offered by that school. In fact, the same is probably true for all religions at all times and places. Anthony J. Blasi (1990: 151) has wisely noted that religious life has a tentative, fragile, casuistical character that can easily be misinterpreted—particularly by those who do not have any "insider" knowledge of a system they are studying but rather bring meaning prejudices from another system of action.

A series of major studies, for example *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985; see also Yamane 2007), *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* by Wade Clark Roof and colleagues (1993), and *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* by Robert Wuthnow (2007) have made an effort to combine survey research with in-depth interviews. While this strategy is not identical to extended participant observation, it is a worthwhile alternative that may

be the best strategy for obtaining the most accurate information available. Much like the medical model of both running tests and actually looking at the patient and taking a careful history, this approach overcomes the small-sample limits of participant observation, but at the same time allows sufficient interaction between the researcher and the sample to ensure that the survey results are placed into the proper meaning context and interpreted as closely as possible to the intention of the subjects who responded to the item.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Yet another research strategy with a distinguished pedigree in the sociology of religion—certainly reaching back to the discipline's founders—is historical research. Here we mine existing historical records for clues about social life at other times and places in order to learn more about human behavior in a comparative perspective; hence we speak of comparative-historical sociology (Christiano 2008; Swatos 2011). Historical research is an especially challenging field, but it also can be misleading, since we are unable to control the situations under which data are gathered. We have to test our data with special care and recognize the possibility that historians and others who have gathered data for us have worked with diverse ends in mind. In addition, since religion is a system of meaning and discourse, we need to recognize that meanings of words change over time. Hence even a fairly rigid historical approach—such as content analysis, where words are counted rather than simply interpreted—must be treated with caution, lest it be assumed that a twenty-first-century meaning of a word or phrase is identical to that of, say, the sixteenth century. Even in a much shorter time frame, for example, a word can be used quite differently across traditions. The label "modernist," for example, meant one thing for Roman Catholics at the turn of the twentieth century, quite another for U.S. Protestants in the 1910s and 1920s. Nevertheless, absent a comparative-historical approach, it is quite difficult to assess the significance of data in our own day. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark's *The Churching of America, 1776–2005* (2005) and Stark's *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (2006) are particularly significant recent works grounded in the historical approach. These books use primarily quantitative data from the past, interpreted in conjunction with geographical circumstances and such specific events as wars, famines, and technological changes to provide sociological accounts of major historical change. In an essay on the concept of secularization, however, Stark (2000) has also shown how concepts created by historians (for example, a European "Age of Faith") can be too quickly taken at face value with detrimental results. Hence it is important that sociologists of religion revisit the data of history and not simply endorse synthetic concepts from other disciplines.

Theory in the Study of Religion

A theory is an explanation—or at least an attempt at an explanation—of how and why things have come to be as they are (the goal of *understanding*). As Peter L.

Berger has pointed out, "the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical" (1963: 17). We do not actually get around to doing sociology until we start explaining whatever data we have found, regardless of how we have obtained them. Gathering statistics or conducting interviews or doing participant observation is not sociology; we start doing social science when we explain why the results we have found are as they are.

Ideally theories also ought to enable us to say, "Well if this is how and why things have come to be as they are, then if certain variables are altered one way or the other, this outcome ought to result" (the goal of *prediction*). Social scientific theories tend to be better in meeting the goal of understanding than they are the goal of prediction, primarily because there are so many confounding variables that impinge across time. Theories, however, also carry interpretive frameworks. That is, in addition to addressing specific means-end questions, they provide a more general perspective on the world or some major sector of it. For example, gene theory not only deals with the relationship of a particular gene to a particular body part, but also makes a more general assertion about *the cause* of why we are as we are. At an extreme this may be phrased as "It's all genetics"—meaning that gene theory can explain the human condition on a broad plane.

FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES

From the 1950s to the 1970s, functionalism was the dominant theoretical perspective in the sociology of religion. As a general theoretical approach functionalism "explains the existence of social institutions such as religion in terms of the needs that the institutions would meet" in society (Blasi 1998: 193). Although functionalism had several variants, the main line of approach derived from an attempt by Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1937) to synthesize the work of Durkheim and Weber. Particularly important in this strategy was the use of the Durkheimian definition that we quoted earlier. Society was interpreted primarily through the biological model, or "organismic" analogy of the body, wherein all the parts work together to maintain the equilibrium of the whole.

Religion was understood to be the glue that held society together: It provided the basis for social solidarity. At first blush, this view would seem to give religion, and through it the sociology of religion, enormous importance, and indeed, within the interests of Parsons himself this was true. More generally, however, this was not the case. Because the Durkheimian definition did not fit modern circumstances, it quickly became apparent to many observers that what was called religion in modern society (that is, the religions that constituted organized religion) was not functioning in this way.

Two reactions occurred: On the one hand there was a "doom-and-gloom" school that saw the supposed declining influence of religion, family instability, and increasing crime rates as evidence that our society was headed into sociomoral chaos. There were cases in which this was taken to mean a larger role for government, or "the state," to replace these institutional functions. For some religious people, furthermore, the doom-and-gloom analysis was also actually appealing, as it seemed consistent with end-of-the-world predictions. A relatively early example

of these was probably evangelical popularizer Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey with Carlson 1970). A lighter version of the message is provided by the series of *Left Behind* books, which we discuss in greater detail in chapter 10.

On the other hand, particularly within the social sciences themselves, there began to be a search for the "real religion" of society. Since the manifest religions didn't seem to fulfill the Durkheimian definition of religion, then obviously something else must be the "real religion" of society. This effort turned the Durkheimian definition into a Procrustean bed, while at the same time it virtually ignored the persistence of the manifest religions in society.

Functionalist theory spawned directly or indirectly a number of middle-range theories. *Deprivation theory*, now largely discredited on the basis of empirical research, claimed that religion met needs—economic, social, political, educational—of deprived people; religion, in other words, was a way in which people who didn't have it quite all together adjusted to life. The roots of deprivation theory are in Charles Glock's writing on religious movements (1964; see also Glock and Stark 1965; Glock, *et al.* 1967), but he later became convinced that this approach had been tried and found wanting (1985). This was a microfunctionalist theory, relating to the individual, but it also harked back to Marx's "opium of the people" dictum (Beckford 1991). *Church-sect theory*, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4, is a conceptual model for religious organizational change. Rooted in the work of Weber, yet also introduced in this country with Marxian overtones in an adaptation by H. Richard Niebuhr, the predominant use of church-sect theory was to show how radical, or deviant, religious organizations gradually accommodated themselves to the dominant society—that is, restored the social equilibrium and maintained social solidarity. *Civil religion* was reintroduced into social science through an enormously influential essay by Parsons's student Robert N. Bellah (1967). This concept and the literature surrounding it, discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, attempted to show that there was a "transcendent religion of the nation" in America that overarched and was separate from the religions of the United States. Ironically, even *secularization theory* had functionalist roots, as Parsons (1960, 1963) attempted to demonstrate how the Judeo-Christian ethic had so penetrated the United States through its Protestant heritage as to make society itself the bearer of that heritage.

CONFLICT THEORIES

In sociology as a whole, functionalism was dealt a major blow in the Vietnam War era by a Marxist-inspired conflict theory. Because of the Marxist critique of religion, however, this approach never generated a theoretical school of any significance in the sociology of religion. Tangential, but important, aspects of its influence may be seen in studies of *liberation theology* (or the "preferential option for the poor"), particularly in Latin America, and in *feminist theory*, which at least in one of its variants sees women as a class oppressed by men as a class, with religious institutions being no less influenced by this tendency than any others.

Whereas functionalism used the organismic analogy as its fundamental metaphor, conflict theory takes from physics the dynamic tension created by forces in opposition to each other, much the way the architectural device of the flying buttress is used to support the walls of great cathedrals. While one might think this analogy, too, could produce positive outcomes for the study of religion, the politics of "world Communism" versus capitalism ensured that this was not the case, inasmuch as the theoretical potential of conflict theory became overwhelmed by both real and imagined conflicts of the superpowers.

Another important, less ideological variant of conflict theory, and one ultimately more relevant to the study of religion, derives from the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974). His work centers on the concept of *social drama*. Social dramas are units of aharmonic processes that arise in conflict situations and represent the time axes of fields—in other words, people act out their disagreements. A field is composed of the individuals, or actors, directly involved in the social processes under examination. Typically these show a regularly recurring processual form or "diachronic profile"—that is, they go back and forth over time—and follow an observable pattern of four phases (see Turner 1974: 37–44). Although not identical, Turner's notion of field can be constructively related to that of Pierre Bourdieu, who writes that any field "presents itself as a structure of probabilities—of rewards, gains, profits, or sanctions—but always implies a measure of indeterminacy. . . . Even in the universe par excellence of rules and regulations, playing with the rule is part and parcel of the rule of the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 18).

Breach is the first of Turner's four phases. A breach occurs in regular norm-governed social relationships between persons or groups within the same social system. People come into conflict on an issue or over a behavior and have what we might call a "falling out." A case can be made that breaches are the inherent dynamic of all sociocultural change that does not result preeminently from external causes—that is, war, earthquake, plague, pestilence, or famine. Hence, Turner's conflict theory is especially well suited to the study of religious change. Most new religious movements throughout history, for example, have resulted from breaches—where different opinions *within* an existing religious pattern have led to breached relationships that have not been accommodated by adjustments within the existing pattern. Unaccommodated breaches can result in the starting of new congregations or even mass movements, such as the Protestant Reformation.

The second step in the drama is that a period of *mounting crisis* or *escalation* follows the breach, unless the conflict can be sealed off quickly. Here the effects may extend to the limits of the parties involved. This second stage is always one of those turning points, when a true state of affairs is revealed and hitherto covert and private factional intrigue is exposed—when, in Turner's words, "it is least easy to don masks or pretend that there is nothing rotten in the village" (1974: 39). The involvement of external actors may serve either to slow or to heighten these processes, hence smoothing over or exacerbating the crisis. Turner calls the external system of action *the arena*. It is "the social and cultural space around those who are directly involved with the field participants but are not themselves directly

implicated in the processes that define the field" (Swartz 1968: 11; see Turner 1985: 84). The arena is characteristically the group's culture, but also includes territorial and political organization. The ordination of gays and lesbians as ministers of religion, for example, is more readily accepted in those religious groups whose members participate in upper-middle-class liberal sociopolitical and socio-economic culture of the West than it is among the working class or among African religious elites.

The third stage of the drama takes place as *adjustive* and *redressive action* is brought into operation by leading members of the social group. Depending on how this works, a fourth stage will ultimately occur in one of two directions—either the *reintegration* of the disturbed social group or the social recognition of an irreparable breach or *schism*. For Turner, this is the moment for an observer to compare relations that preceded the social drama with those following the redressive phase. The scope, range, or structure of the field will have altered. Yet, through all the changes—some crucial, others seemingly less so—certain norms and relations will persist. In Bourdieu's terms, this represents the role of *habitus*—a "strategy generating principle" that permits social actors "to cope with unseen and ever-changing situations . . . a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 18). Turner's best-known application of his theory is to the African Ndembu (1967), but in other essays he has applied it to varied cases, both historical and contemporary.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Although conflict theory presents a valuable alternative to functionalism for modeling actual social relations, it was not conflict theory but secularization theory that began to sound the death knell for functionalism within the sociology of religion. In a seminal article published in 1993, R. Stephen Warner demonstrated that a "new paradigm" (or new theoretical approach) had emerged in the sociology of religion. The core difference within the new paradigm is a movement away from seeing religion as derivative of something else, as it was in functionalism and its many variants, including secularization theory. New-paradigm sociology of religion takes religion as real or as an independent variable—that is, as much a part of human behavioral dispositions as any other system of action.

By raising serious questions about the relationship between what people called religion and the putative societal "needs" that functionalist theorists claimed religions should be meeting, new-paradigm theorists highlighted a crucial disjuncture between practice and theory in the sociology of religion. Yet the mortal blow to macrostructural models was actually dealt by a series of small daggers via the appearance of NRMs both as separate organizations (for example, the Unification Church, as in the research of Barker [1984] and Bromley and Shupe [1979a]) and within the dominant traditions themselves (such as the charismatic movement in Roman Catholicism, as illustrated in the research accounts of McGuire [1982]

and Neitz [1987]). From time to time NRM research is criticized because so much energy has been invested in studying and writing about groups that have attracted only an infinitesimally small proportion of the population into their membership. Two or three books may be available on a group that never had more than a few hundred members or lasted more than a decade, while there may exist a dearth of information on a century-old denomination of four hundred thousand members. But this misses the point of the theoretical significance of NRM studies to the sociology of religion. The NRMs proved that the religious impulse in American society was strong and vital, ready to bubble up at any stimulation. Stark and colleagues refer to this tendency as the "limits to secularization" (see Stark and Bainbridge 1980b, 1985, 1996). NRMs also proved that the Durkheimian definition simply did not work in contemporary society. Thus, NRMs forced the breaking of entirely new theoretical ground in the sociology of religion.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORIES

Although Warner made clear that new-paradigm theory in sociology has several variants (for example, a Geertzian one emphasized in the work of Nancy Ammerman [1997a, 1997b] and Mary Jo Neitz [2000]), it has largely come to be associated with *rational choice theory* (see Nizigama 2013; Young 1997), though some among the proponents of even this approach reject this specific title. Rational choice theory is preeminently associated with the names of Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannaccone, and William Sims Bainbridge (see Bainbridge 1997; Bainbridge and Stark 1984; Iannaccone 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997; Stark 1996, 1998). The rational choice approach finds its origins in the classical economic theory of Adam Smith and other figures of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment (see Iannaccone 1991). Gordon Marshall (1982) shows that the work of Max Weber was as much, if not more, in dialogue with the "ghosts" of these men than with the ghost of Karl Marx, as an earlier generation of commentators had said of Weber's work. A major proponent of this broader perspective among sociologists in the United States in the guise of exchange theory was Parsons's Harvard colleague and critic George C. Homans (1958, 1974). Also influential is University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate Gary Becker (1976).

At the core of rational choice theory is a view of the human being as a "rational" actor, making choices that she or he thinks best, calculating costs and benefits. This model is sometimes referred to by the Latin phrase *homo economicus*. The core proposition of this theoretical orientation is that religious choice-making (or religious action) does not differ significantly as a process from other forms of choice-making—that is, that the decision-making processes that people use in their religious or spiritual lives are not different from the processes that they use to buy a car, contract a marriage, take a vacation, or choose a college or a career. What this means, sociologically speaking, is that religion is not inherently more or less serious than other spheres of human endeavor, except as it is perceived to be by participant actors.

Over against the Durkheimian model, rational choice theory insists that collective *action* is always the action of collected *actors*. One simply cannot have collective action without specific individual actors. This is not psychological reductionism but straightforward noncontradiction. As I. M. Lewis (1986: 8) rightly notes, "Whatever Durkheim may have said, the people we study are *not* robots. . . . Excessive preoccupation with the so-called theoretical models," may conceal a "lack of originality and the contrasting richness of the peoples we study." If this becomes the case, "it is *we*, not *they*, who are the puppets" (emphasis in the original). Bainbridge (1985) defends the individualism of this theoretical approach as part of a more general preference for theories that embrace *methodological individualism* and reject actions among structures (and other "scientific" abstractions).

A couple of *caveats* about what the rational choice perspective does not say may also be helpful. The word *rational* is used in different ways. In philosophy, the rational side of human life is often posited over against the emotional side. This is not the use here. Emotional decision-making is also a part of the rational choice model. Let's say that you are shopping for a car and decide to buy the red one because you like the way it looks. The philosophical rationalist would say, "That's not a rational decision." For rational choice theory, it is: You are getting a *reward*, because the red car apparently will make you happier. Of course, later you may realize you made a bad or silly decision. That is not the point. The point is that you did think about the decision and decided to go with color as your ultimate criterion. Someone else may buy a car of a color she admits she does not like, because she got a great price on the car. Her action is also rational. Yet a third person may buy a car that is neither a color he likes nor sold at a particularly good price, because he believes the car will perform with such excellence that these other criteria are mere distractions. This, too, is a rational decision. See how complex this makes the matter of understanding decisions? Rational choice theory says the same kinds of processes occur in religious decision-making—one person may join a church, say, for the wonderful music, another for the fellowship of the people involved, another may want to avoid going to hell, another finds the preaching style intellectually challenging, and so on. In rational choice theory, all of these decisions are rational in the sense that they are centered on the satisfaction of wants.

Because it is the case that there are, as Max Weber would put it, "multiple and competing rationales for action," rational choice theory does not detract from those theoretical contributions of people, such as Geertz (1983) and Turner (1974), who wish to emphasize "local knowledge" or "social drama." If it were the case that for any decision there was only one "rational" choice, then of course rational choice theory might succumb to the provocative, but ultimately misplaced, critique that where rational choice theory is right, it is obvious, and where it is not obvious, it is wrong. Because actors are almost always in multiple situations simultaneously, the choice-making process is never simple. There are likely to be both conflicts and circumstantial idiosyncrasies that must be unpacked with the greatest of care. Thus rational choice theory is a general theory of action that in application begs for specificity; indeed, the more one commits to the new paradigm, the greater the need for what Geertz calls "thick description" (1973:

3–30) in order to lay bare the multilayered meaning complexes that intersect in religious decision-making.

Rational choice theory is at the same time morally neutral. That is, in themselves there are no good or bad decisions. People may subsequently come to regret decisions they have made, but these subsequent regrets have no influence on the decision. They can't. They come *after* the decision, and basic logic teaches us that temporal priority cannot be laid aside. You may say, "But there are people who make the same dumb decision over and over again." Yes, there are; that may mean they have not learned anything from the experience (that is, it is they who are dumb, not the decisions). But it also may mean that it is simply easier (less costly) for them at the time of decision-making to make the same decision even though it will cost them more in the end. For example, someone may take a longer route to school or work even though she knows there's a shorter route, simply because it takes less mental energy to follow the accustomed path than it does to take the new one. The recidivist alcoholic who takes "just one more" drink simply may find that action the least costly way of dealing with a problem situation: It is the most familiar. People may continue to go to an Episcopal church even though they are unhappy with it rather than going through the effort it would take for them to become Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox. This also explains why, when people do switch denominational affiliations, they routinely elect destinations that are not too distant culturally from the ones that they held previously (Hadaway and Marler 1993; see, more generally, Greeley 1989; Iannaccone 1990; and Loveland 2003).

No decision is a decision. This probably is the most paradoxical truth of "choice" theory, but it is certainly true nonetheless. If you can't decide whether to have a hamburger or pizza for dinner to the point that you have no dinner, then you have had no dinner. That decision will have consequences for you. If you can't decide whether to do a written or oral report in a course that gives you a choice, and you do neither, you will probably earn an F. If you can't decide which girl or guy to date, you may end up sitting in your room alone. The examples run on and on, and they are all true. A decision not to affiliate with any religion means that you are religiously nonaffiliated. We live in a choice-making world where not choosing is choosing.

It would be far too complex here to try to outline how all of this applies to religion. In their primary theoretical manifesto, *A Theory of Religion* (1996), for example, Stark and Bainbridge list seven basic axioms from which hundreds of actual propositions, let alone the nuances of those as applied to specific cases, flow for understanding religion (see Stark 1999 for a modification of this theory). We can mention a few possibilities: In "Why Strict Churches Are Strong," for example, Iannaccone (1994) shows that there is a general principle of investment that says that the more people invest in something, the harder they will work to protect their investment. If a person buys a new, fairly expensive car, he or she is likely to be out polishing it when it doesn't even need it (or hiring someone else to do the same); if the same person buys a junker that's already banged up, the only water it's likely to see is the rain. Applied to religion, this says that if people become convinced that a strict church offers them the true path to eternal bliss, and they

have to go through a lot (which may mean to give up a lot) to get into that church, they are more likely to work a lot harder for that church. In other words, once we become convinced that demands are legitimate, the more demands placed upon us to achieve our goals, the more we'll try to meet. Someone who buys an expensive car usually will spend more in upkeep for that car. Someone who goes to a doctor and fails to improve goes back to the same doctor. Some students are proud that they are attending a "hard" school or taking a "hard" course.

As another example, it is said that as people get older, they become more religious. Research, however, shows that this needs to be qualified: As religious people get older, they become more religious. Nonreligious people seldom convert in old age and may actually become more religiously resistant. Rational choice explains this easily: The more people have invested in something, the more they invest, particularly if they think it pays a good return. Just as older people who have individual retirement accounts (IRAs) are likely simultaneously to draw from them and return money to other instruments available from the IRA provider, so religious people draw more from their religious institution while they also give more to it. Nonreligious people, having made no investment, find altering their life pattern only that much more difficult as they age, when learning a new religious pattern may seem bewildering, and therefore costly. It is unlikely that people who have not thought religion offered benefits throughout their lives would suddenly adopt an entirely different worldview. An analogue may be found in the movement of people to retirement settings: The people who are happiest when they move to a retirement setting are people who have moved around all their lives; those who are most miserable are those who have lived the bulk of their lives in one place.

At the same time, we should not assume that simply because strict churches are apparently stronger than lax churches, all members of strict churches observe their churches' disciplines strictly. As we mentioned earlier, Melinda Wagner (1990, 1997) and Susan Rose (1988) have each shown that there is an array of cultural contradictions and patterns of accommodation manifested within putatively strict evangelical Christian institutions, such as schools and churches (see also Gallagher and Smith 1999). People may admire a strict religion because they think it is what religion ought to be like, even though they are not entirely prepared to conform to those norms in their own lives. That is, some people consider religion an "institution of oughts," as a result of which they expect a church or denomination to articulate high standards—even if these same people cannot themselves attain them. People in effect pay the religious institution to symbolize an ideal realm of transcendent beliefs and moral practices (see Tamney and Johnson 1998). They may send their children to religious schools not because of particular religious doctrines but because they believe that their children are safer there or that the most crucial aspects of formal education (the "three Rs") are best taught there.

The "strictness" principle does not hold universally, however. Some people are proud of the fact that they attend an "easy" college or have found an "easy" course—and yet become alumni who donate a lot of money to the school. Similarly, some people are drawn to low-demand religions, yet nevertheless are faithful

participants and generous contributors. The advantage of the strictness thesis is not that it applies in all cases, because it clearly does not (see Ellison and Sherkat 1995), but rather that it makes actions that seem senseless to outsiders actually reasonable. And this is precisely what good theory is supposed to do: provide an integrated system of propositions that makes understandable (or explains) behaviors that superficially seem to make no sense. Good social scientific theory provides a reasonable, consistent answer to the question: *Why would anybody want to do that?*

What this means, in part, is that religious motivation comes from diverse sources that lie in individuals' unique biographies. We can certainly talk about types of people, hence creating some abilities at prediction, but we can never assume that two people in the same setting will interpret the actions and claims around them in the same way. Indeed, in terms of Western worship at least, one of the primary values of the sermon is to create a common interpretative context for the congregation; yet even this may fail, as different people get different things out of it.

Rational choice theory has not been without its critics. Principal among these are Roy Wallis (Wallis and Bruce 1984), Steve Bruce (1999), Mark Chaves (1995; Chaves and Gorski 2001), and James V. Spickard (1998). Others aspire to revise and amend rational choice theory to render it more sociologically realistic by insisting that the embeddedness of institutional practice be recognized. They are led by Christopher G. Ellison, Darren E. Sherkat, and their colleagues (Ellison 1995; Ellison and Sherkat 1995; Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Cunningham 1998; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Cultural, socioeconomic, gender, and other sociological factors play an especially significant role in focusing the lenses through which we perceive religious experience. Nevertheless, in its broad outlines, the rational choice perspective provides a dynamic new theoretical kit for disassembling the parts that make up our religious life.

But that life is more complicated than the theory sometimes admits. Religion is a social institution, marked by distinctive features of its social context. These features, in addition, persist beyond the lifetimes of those persons who are alive at the moment of their development. Religion is carried over space and through time by societies. Indeed, the special advantage of societies is that the precipitating conditions for social innovation need not be replicated in every generation. In many locales, religion comes to permeate the cultural atmosphere. In the traditions of these places, one no more *chooses* religion to play a role in one's life than one chooses to initiate each breath that one takes. As the historian Oscar Handlin described religious membership among European immigrants to the United States, "the Church gave no reason for being; it was. Its communicants were within it not because they had rationally accepted its doctrines; they had faith because they were in it" (1951: 119).

In their own defense, Stark and Bainbridge contend that their propositions "deal with religious commitment in a way that is neither more reductionistic nor less comprehensive than previous treatments" (1996: 52). Perhaps this is so, but theirs is a response based on distinctions of degree and not ones of kind. Religion in *A Theory of Religion* is something whose power arises not from what Peter

Berger (1967) would call its "facticity," but rather from the common neediness of those who resort to it. Thus, if rational choice theory is any kinder to religion than was old-time functionalism, it is because the theory harbors a less lofty view of the human being's state in the world, not because it possesses any superior measure of respect for its subject.

In a similar vein, Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce detected in the Stark-Bainbridge theory an "assumption that there is something inherently faulty or unsatisfactory in religion, that it could never be desired except as compensation for something better" (1984: 14). They continue,

> Having a friend in Jesus is a great solace for the lonely, just as the promise of post-millennial power is a welcome hope for those who suffer deprivation and stigma in the pre-millennial world. But to admit that religion may provide compensation for failure to secure [a] present tangible reward is not to advance a theory of religion, only a theory *about* what religion is or does for some people. (Wallis and Bruce 1984: 18; emphasis in the original)

Religious faith is not easily comprehended, to be sure, but that is not to say that those who embrace it have accommodated themselves to, or have settled for, an inferior brand of ideology.

All the same, ambivalence once again intervenes. One is under no obligation to conclude, as Bainbridge and Stark accused their first critics of having done, "that a whole theoretical approach is doomed to failure if some of the concepts introduced quickly in early publications seem incomplete." A conscientious reader would agree with them that "the construction of rigorous, deductive-empirical explanatory theory is a big job, requiring the work of many minds over several years. And the final outcome of the war cannot be judged on the basis of whether the first bugle plays exactly in tune" (Bainbridge and Stark 1984: 146). This is fair enough. Even if one pronounces Stark and Bainbridge's call to arms far off-key, one should wait and keep listening. Certainly more voices (if not bugles) should be heard on these issues. If rational choice theory be reductionist, Stark and his colleagues are making the most of it. They are testing the boundaries of what can be accomplished with a very determined application of a single, explicit approach. Their theory, as Martin E. Marty noted in an early review of *The Future of Religion* (Stark and Bainbridge 1985), "can be stretched to suit all purposes. . . . Yet, the 'compensation' theory does plausibly stretch far" (Marty 1986b: 208).

Thus a final *caveat*: Students of any sociology (sociology of religion or sociology of the railroad) need to be constantly aware of the levels-of-analysis problem —namely, that sociology works with aggregate or group data. Sociological predictions tell what *types* of people are more or less likely to engage in different *types* of activities successfully or unsuccessfully. This means that sociology can never predict the specific action patterns of specific individuals. Sociologists can say what the probability is that students of one or another social background are more or less likely to succeed in college or to engage in lives of crime or to establish successful marriages or to adopt a particular religious lifestyle. They cannot say this about any specific individual. This is no different from a pharmaceutical

company being able to say that a particular drug is successful in treating a set of symptoms 80 percent of the time. A medical doctor will then have to decide whether to use this drug in the treatment of a specific patient. That decision will be based on other aspects of the patient's history, other medications the patient must take, and the probable outcomes of not using the drug or using the drug unsuccessfully—and some room may have to be made, as well, for simple trial and error. Failure to apply the appropriate level of analysis is one of the most frequent sources for misunderstanding sociological data and theories.

SOCIOLOGIE RELIGIEUSE

Although "the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical" (P. Berger 1963: 17), we would be remiss if we did not point out that there is also an applied tradition in the sociology of religion, often known by its French title *sociologie religieuse*. (*Sociologie religieuse* literally translates as "religious sociology," but that phrase has come to have different connotations in Anglo-American sociology.) More the practice of geography than sociology, French *sociologie religieuse*, associated with such figures as Gabriel Le Bras (1955, 1956) and Fernand Boulard (1960), was typified by the meticulous tabulation of statistics on ecclesiastical activities such as baptisms and church marriages across decades and even centuries. Painstakingly mapped over parishes, localities, and regions, these figures revealed a historical portrait of striking religious change.

In the United States, applied sociology of religion dates from the very beginnings of sociology in this country, though it took a quantum leap forward beginning in the 1920s with the work of H. Paul Douglass and the Institute of Social and Religious Research. This institute came to sponsor and execute, and eventually to amass, thousands of studies of individual Protestant congregations and regional units, many of which are now available in microform (Brewer and Johnson 1972, 1979; Research Publications 1975). On the Catholic side, a Harvard-educated Jesuit, Joseph H. Fichter (1951, 1954), starting in the 1950s, extended and improved the French style of research through comprehensive studies of parish life.

Applied sociology of religion continues to be a major professional domain of sociologists of religion. Most of this work is done under the aegis of religious organizations themselves, either directly by in-house staffs or indirectly by paid independent consultants. Much of this work is of a practical nature. Some is entirely atheoretical, but most is simply seeking more immediate kinds of explanations than grand models like functionalism or rational choice theory provide. If a religious denomination wants to know what kinds of individuals assigned as pastors to new churches bring about the greatest numerical growth in congregation size, it can attempt to do research on the already existing congregations that have had this experience (the previous cohort of newly founded churches). The organization really does not have to care about more expansive questions of social solidarity or cost-benefit decision-making. It can, in effect, assume either of these

underlying models and still place the most effective person in the position, if on the one hand it can generate accurate data, and on the other the context of church growth has not significantly altered over the time between the prior new church founding and the present. (Examples of present-day research studies that are most useful to churches in their planning and programs are Bibby [1995]; Chaves and Miller [1999]; Hadaway and Roozen [1995]; Hoge, *et al.* [1997]; Roozen and Hadaway [1993]; and Roozen and Nieman [2005].)

A real-world case study may also help illustrate both how *sociologie religieuse* can help in problem definition and how theory can expand upon that foundation: Local Episcopalians with a chaplaincy at a large south-central U.S. state university were disappointed in their program and were seeking a new chaplain to do innovative things. They complained that average attendance at their worship activities was only eight people, whereas the Roman Catholics, who shared a common chapel building, had more than one hundred—enough to stream out of the chapel into the facility's common room. When queried, however, the Episcopalians indicated that thirty-two students on campus had been identified as Episcopalian; when queried further, they indicated that about four thousand students were Roman Catholic. By attendance rate the Episcopalians were doing *ten times better* than the Roman Catholics! They could further have learned that hardly any denomination has an average weekly attendance rate exceeding 50 percent of its membership, and that high school and college students are among the least frequent attendees at services (though those few who do attend are often among the most active). A rational choice approach could complement these *sociologie religieuse* data by indicating the kinds of factors that keep college-student attendance rates down, and why those who deviate from the norm tend to be relatively highly committed. This same approach would also indicate that caution should be used in extrapolating data from currently active youth and young adults to future denominational congregants. That is, what young people want in the denomination today may not be what the broad spectrum of potential congregants twenty years from now will be looking for. Denominational planning based on current youths' desires may be inadequately sensitive to the strictness effects of the deviant commitment that is associated with high-level youth activism.

Religious organizations, like all other organizations, need accurate data on which to base their organizational decisions. These decisions, just like decisions made by individuals, will follow rational choice principles; that is, an official or some official body will decide what is best for the group. That decision may or may not prove to be a wise one over time; it may or may not be regretted. We cannot assume that a rational decision made at one point in an organization's development will necessarily seem good at another point. What we should be able to do, however, by understanding the choice-making process, is see how an organization got from one point to another in its development, hence be better equipped intellectually to modify a particular course of action.

IMPLICIT RELIGION

The *implicit religion* concept has been working its way into general use in the social scientific study of religion for almost forty years. There are really three

streams of development of the concept. Its Anglo-American use, on which we will focus in this section, is certainly to be credited to the British scholar Edward Bailey (1935–2015) and, under his aegis, to the Denton Hall Conference on Implicit Religion, held in North Yorkshire, which celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary in 2012, and for more than a decade to the Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality, offering degree programs through the University of Wales, Bangor. There is also, however, an Italian approach associated with the work of Arnaldo Nesti of the sociology faculty of the University of Florence *(Il religioso implicito* [1985]; see Nesti, *et al.* [1993]), and a Dutch approach by Meerten ter Borg of the theology faculty of the University of Leiden (*Een Uitgewaairde Enuwigheid* [1991]).

The extent to which the concept of implicit religion has penetrated the study of religion is really quite remarkable, especially in light of the fact that for the most part Bailey has not had a cadre of graduate students to send forth as disciples, nor has he developed an extensive set of major publications. Indeed, his magnum opus, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society*, long available only in manuscript, was not published until 1997. He has had a single-minded determination, however, to advance both the use and insight of the concept; yet it must also be said that the concept seems to be one whose time had come. The development of the implicit religion concept was the result of debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s over such concepts as civil religion, invisible religion, civic religion, and European debate and research into popular religion conceived and approached in several different ways. The concept is strongly interdisciplinary in character, and that may be part of its appeal. It is also rooted in the religious studies tradition that asserts that there is an irreducible spiritual or religious dimension within human existence—that everybody has some "ultimate" or set of ultimates (Tillich 1957), even if it be self. "I believe in putting Number One first," for example, is an implicitly religious credo.

Bailey (1998a: 235) writes that "the concept has at least three (nonexclusive) definitions: *commitment(s)* or *integrating foci* or *intensive concerns with extensive effects*" (emphasis in the original). This polysemous quality (that is, its simultaneous multiple meanings) may be part of the concept's appeal. Nevertheless, as Bailey also notes, this approach stands at least apart from, if not over against, and "counterbalances the tendency to equate 'religion' with specialized institutions, with articulated beliefs, and with that which is consciously willed (or specifically intended)." Yet this should not be taken to mean that implicit religion is somehow only an inner disposition of individuals. Implicit religions can work at the macro level, and one might see both civil religion in the United States, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, and civic religion in Britain as macro-manifestations of implicit religion.

Macro-manifestations need not be identified with the political, however. There is an implicit religion surrounding Elvis Presley that is generally apolitical and transcends national boundaries. People in England, for example, have "shrine rooms" to Elvis; "pilgrims" come from all over the world to Elvis's Tennessee home, Graceland (a name itself pregnant with religious significance); and various Elvis sightings recur in the tabloids to give this star a hint of immortality that many of his most devoted fans find comforting (Rodman 1996). Sports can have

an implicitly religious character, though one should not thereby make the facile jump to a claim that any kind of sports fandom is therefore "making a religion out of sports." As Bailey is fond of saying, there is a significant difference between the assertion that *anything can be* religious and *everything is* religious. The latter is simply neopantheism and, in fact, misses the distinctively religious element within a "religious" experience.

Americans are likely to find echoes of Paul Tillich's "ultimate concern" (1957) as well as of J. Milton Yinger's attempts (1970) to measure ultimate concern as an empirical, functional definition of religion in the implicit religion concept. Certainly both are closely related. Bailey's approach tends to be somewhat less abstract and rationalistic than either of these. He wants to know what issues are important to people, what makes them happy, what gives them joy, what people think is really wrong or disgusting behavior, and so on. He is also willing to accept that people cannot necessarily articulate the reasons for these responses. In his own work (carried out initially in three studies that focused on a boarding high school, a pub, and a parish community), Bailey was most influenced by the English cleric-professor F. B. Welbourn, who spent a great deal of his life in Africa, where he became quite critical of European approaches to the definition, hence the study, of religion, as simply being out-of-touch with the way Africans lived their lives (see Welbourn 1965, 1968). In Welbourn's view the rationalistic, academic, theological biases of European (and American) approaches to the spiritual dimension of human existence brought so many preconceptions with them that they were forcing African data into molds that were totally inappropriate to hold them. Implicit religion became both the topic of Bailey's doctoral thesis and his response to reconsidering Western religion in light of Welbourn's critique.

We introduce the concept of implicit religion at the close of this chapter to signal the importance of being sensitive to what might be called, as Thomas Luckmann (1990) has, the "little transcendences" in human life and the need to build conceptual bridges that link these to the "great transcendences" of the world religions. Sociologically it is important to recognize that religion begins somewhere; as the sixteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart phrased it, "before man, God was not God." Of course, if there is a Supreme Being, that Being has existed before time and forever, but the naming of that Being and the recognition of the attributes of that Being arise in human experience. To seek how people come to commit, to value, to adore, to hate, to celebrate, to grieve—to do these things and to account for them—is to seek the rough ground out of which religions arise and to which religions are called to speak at all times and in all places.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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