

Sociology of Religion in the U.S.: The State of the Art

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever else it may be, the sociology of religion is sociology. This means it can be held to the notably difficult ideal of linking important ideas with rigorous methods in the analysis of social data. Because of the difficulty of the ideal and the heavy demands for specialized training it embodies, sociology is especially vulnerable to fragmentation. Some sociologists will be tempted to escape into the loftier realms of social speculation, philosophy or history; others will turn their efforts to constructing finely tuned measurement instruments, intensifying their strictly technical endeavors when they have lost sight of any larger theoretical aims. There are, of course, many sociologists not particularly liable to either of these temptations, and over the last two decades in American sociology, the discipline as a whole has developed considerable awareness and sophistication about such matters. But sociology does not, thereby, suddenly become an easy endeavor, promising great success soon to be attained. Nor is there reason to become paralyzed or cynical before the challenge.

It is against this idea, nevertheless, that sociology's progress or failure to progress must be measured—a criterion that applies equally to the discipline as a whole as well as to any of its parts. If I were to be asked whether the major deficiency in recent and current sociology of religion is theoretical or methodological, I would have to answer “both.” Our theories generally do not

This paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies, Tsukuba University 9–11 October 1981. It appears here in slightly revised form.

predict very well and our measures do not measure very well. Put differently, the sociology of religion suffers from a lack of data and knowledge on matters of essential interest. On the whole, it has so far made use of rather rudimentary methods in a technological sense, although this may not have been altogether disadvantageous, given its general condition of underdevelopment. Perhaps one reason sociologists of religion are not acutely embarrassed whenever they confront colleagues from other disciplines is that these colleagues are generally too naive about religion to recognize our weakness in both theory and method. As someone deeply concerned about both religion and sociology, I confess that I am occasionally torn between anger at the methodologists who think that a change in response from those saying they are "very certain" about the existence of God to those saying they are "fairly certain" provides clear evidence for secularization, and anger at those scholars who, from the secure position of their armchairs, pontificate about religious matters utterly innocent of any empirical evidence at all.

Certainly the sociology of religion has benefitted from a number of reasonably important ideas. In the historical background loom figures like Durkheim and Weber, Marx and Freud, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and Talcott Parsons. This considerable intellectual tradition has been continued by scholars like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Robert Bellah and Clifford Geertz, Bryan Wilson, Mary Douglas, and David Martin. Curiously, despite these influential contributions, the theoretical issues inherent in the discipline since its beginnings still dominate our deepest concerns: (a) Where *is* the sacred in modern society? (b) What is the relationship of so-called religious organizations to the sacred? (c) How, and to what extent, are people conscious of the sacred; how do they manifest it, and with what effect? In the U.S., religion was an important variable in the early decades of American sociology. It nearly disappeared after World War I and did not reappear with any vigor until the 1950's. It was resurrected then largely by questions of whether the religious

revival taking place at the time was genuine and whether, indeed, it was taking place at all. American sociology never answered either question very conclusively, and the theoretical issues they implied, as well as those implied in the earliest studies in the sociology of religion are, in fact, as far from resolution today as they were two decades ago.

During the last twenty years, of course, the sociology of religion in the U.S. has greatly expanded. Two journals devoted to its study have been founded—the *Review of Religious Research* in 1959 and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* in 1961.¹ A third—the *American Catholic Sociological Review*—was transformed in the early 1970's from a general purpose sociology journal to one explicitly devoted to the sociology of religion, now called *Sociological Analysis*.² Why, then, has so little progress been made,

1. Each of these journals has a different origin and focus. The *RRR* grew out of what was first called the Religious Research Fellowship, a group of Protestant religious researchers affiliated with the National Council of Churches. The group later changed its name to the Religious Research Association, and since 1970, has been explicitly ecumenical in scope. The articles published in the *RRR* generally focus on "applied" research in the sociology of religion, although more general articles not directly related to matters of policy or practice are also frequently published. The *JSSR* is published by the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, an organization founded in 1960 by a group of humanistically oriented scholars from mostly East-coast American universities who were concerned with the social scientific study of religion. From its beginnings, the *SSSR* has been both ecumenical and inter-disciplinary in scope. The *JSSR* has consistently held to this focus, although the majority of its articles are sociological in approach.
2. The American Catholic Sociological Society was founded in the mid-1930's to provide a forum for the discussion of value-related issues in sociology at a time when sociology in the U.S. was dominantly empiricist and positivistic in emphasis. A secondary aim of the Society was to promote the establishment of sociology programs at all Catholic colleges and universities in the U.S. With the gradual decrease of radical positivism in American sociology and the discrediting of the dichotomy between "pure" and "applied" sociology, the continued need for this professional association was strong questioned. At the same time, the ACSS had become more ecumenical in membership and more focused on the sociology of religion. Hence, the change in name

especially in out theoretical understanding?

A REVIEW OF JOURNAL LITERATURE

One clue to an answer may be found in the articles published in these three journals over the past twenty years—by reviewing a sample of articles in terms of their research strategies and theoretical perspective and selecting the sample precisely to highlight changes that may have occurred. Using 1961–65 and 1976–80 as points of comparison, what trends may be observed?³

Looking first at research strategies, we find three general patterns:

1. Assembling and reviewing previous studies and new applications of old ideas used to play a small role in the published sociology of religion, and they still do (about 3 percent in both 1961–65 and 1976–80).
2. Programmatic statements (about what should be studied or how it should be studied), and especially theoretical speculation, was once a significant part of this literature, but more recently both have faded into insignificance (about 17 percent in the earlier period, less than 7 percent in the latter).
3. The bulk of scholarly articles was and remains quantitative, but the vast majority of the work (over 80 percent by my count) was and is largely a-theoretical. It consists overwhelmingly of three-variable investigations and of measurement (or concept) refinement. This research demonstrates, for example, that religious beliefs can be factor-analyzed into one, four, or five

of the organization to the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and of its journal to *Sociological Analysis*, represented a natural transition, despite the fact that the change itself was hotly debated for several years before it occurred.

3. This review of the recent literature in the American sociology of religion was first undertaken by Professor Benton Johnson (University of Oregon) and presented in a panel discussion on theory and research at the 1979 meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. Although I have extended Johnson's earlier review by one year, much of the first section of this paper summarizes his findings and draws heavily on his interpretation.

factors; that old people exhibit the same dimensions of belief as the rest of the population, but only if they live in nursing homes; that one dimension alone explains 93 percent of the variance in responses to an index of civil libertarianism, and this dimension turns out to be differently related to religious orthodoxy, church attendance, and private devotionalism. Someone can then be counted on to show that the situation is also different for blacks and whites, except that black Catholics seem to resemble East European Jews more than they do either German Jews or Catholics from Southern Europe.

It is not difficult, of course, to belittle this sort of thing. The goal of science is, after all, the reduction of empiricism, not its endless elaboration. Much of this literature is based on careful, elaborate, costly, and technically current research strategies; nevertheless, these strategies are not very relevant to any theories we might be developing.

What, then, does a review of the past twenty years tell us about theory development in the sociology of religion? The virtual disappearance of theoretical speculation has apparently been replaced by more data-dredging. We seem to have eliminated the philosopher types in our midst without replacing them with any theorists. The journal literature in American sociology of religion over the last two decades reveals several interesting patterns.

First, about 25 percent of the empirical articles in both 1961-65 and 1976-80 employ theoretical perspectives which can be termed "administrative-bureaucratic" and "societal." The former focuses on organizations and groups (or roles within them) and looks at topics like organizational leadership, innovation, shape, growth, and decline. The latter includes studies of religious movements or histories of movements within a whole society.

Secondly, the remaining 75 percent of the empirical articles in both periods deal not with social phenomena but with individual attitudes, values and behavior. Although it is certainly possible to learn something about society from amassing data about individuals, the theoretical perspective employed in these studies

is strictly social psychological. The social psychological perspective, in turn, may be distinguished into theory that is primarily rational cognitive in emphasis and theory that is primarily a-rational and emotional. Thus, the rational-cognitive assumes that people are thoughtful; that the pieces of their lives fit together rationally or else they experience distress; and that as sociologists we can understand and predict their individual behavior if we but know what they know. A theory that emphasizes the a-rational and emotional assumes that people respond to forces they comprehend only imperfectly, if at all; that these forces are often contradictory; and even if identified for participants, might not be recognized by them as influencing their conduct.

Finally, throughout both periods under review, the rational-cognitive emphasis was the dominant social psychological perspective, even though the ratio between the two has declined significantly in recent years. During 1961-65, the rational-cognitive outnumbered the a-rational-emotional by almost four to one, while the ratio fell to approximately two-and-a-half to one in the 1976-80 period. Moreover, while about six out of ten of all articles are largely a-theoretical, fully 75 percent of those with a rational-cognitive emphasis are devoted to measurement or concept-refinement. The possibilities of theory development here are practically non-existent. Whatever is found is reported. Often enough it is reported in the form of hypotheses, but instead of increasing our knowledge of the world, it creates distinctions which we do not make or cannot use, making up in superficial precision what it lacks in theoretical relevance. If Weber, Simmel, Freud, and James are the inspirations here, it is unlikely that they would recognize the work as being in their tradition.

It is important to note that the preceding critique is centered on the gap between theory and research in a collection of articles.⁴

4. It may be, of course, that books and not journals are the place to find continuity, accumulation, and consolidation. I fear, however, that a review of the monograph literature in the American sociology of religion over the last two decades would reveal the same patterns found in the journal articles.

Many of these studies are individually fine examples of social science. Nevertheless, seen together, these years of articles offer little in the way of theoretical development. We know little more now about the sacred than we did before.

SOME SIGNS OF HOPE

The situation in the American sociology or religion is not entirely gloomy, however. There are some signs of hope and of potential vitality that deserve mention, even if the need for caution remains.

American sociology of religion has shown, for example, considerable interest in the so-called "new religious movements." While these movements have generally been treated as abnormal phenomena that emerge in periods of social disorder, as responses to experiences of relative social deprivation, or as products of the extraordinary creativity and originality of their founders, this widespread interest has opened up new and different areas of investigation: religious experience (especially mysticism), symbolism, the charismatic movement, glossolalia, conservative Protestantism, in addition to assorted imported Eastern religions. Along with these new topics has also come an appreciation for the a-rational and emotional in religion, and what may turn out to be a promising and more general shift away from a concentration of social psychological studies of the rational-cognitive type. One might also expect, on the basis of the recent journal literature, an increase in studies of the administrative/bureaucratic and societal type.

Religion, it is being rediscovered, is a social fact, and with Durkheim, we may be rediscovering also that society is a religious fact. Thus, from investigations into civil religion to the call for phenomenological research, from studies of religio-ethnic ties to the implications of symbolic realism, from new looks at the paranormal to the contributions of attribution theory, we are being forced to abandon the model borrowed from physics—the view that people are understood mechanically. Especially in the sociology of religion this model has been disastrously non-accumulative, perhaps

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because religion deals exactly with the non-mechanical, the inflexible, the a-rational and emotional—in short, with the sacred.

The rediscovery of society as a religious fact may also release us from the shackles of an increasingly fruitless “secularization” controversy. The controversy frequently seems to have been generated primarily by the ideological conviction that religion must be declining in importance because it ought to be declining in importance (quite often as part of some larger dynamic of “modernization” and in support of empirical evidence). When secularization as a concept is finally specified, it often sounds rather like Parsons’ notion of “differentiation”—the absence of direct religious influence on the new corporate orders which have emerged in the modern world. This proposition is true in some sense, and, one supposes, even beyond the trivial in some sense. But it does not follow that because religion exists in the “private sphere” and in the “interstices” among the larger corporate structures, religion is thereby unimportant or even less important.

Ten to fifteen years ago the sociology of religion heard calls to abolish the category of “the sacred” altogether; now we are told that the sacred has returned. Clearly it has been there all along, but we are just now getting smarter about how to study it. There is no doubt that twenty years ago American sociologists took heart at a sociology of religion that was reactivating after a quiescence of forty years. Twenty years later the activity continues, but it has not yet accumulated very much insight, certainly not in terms of consolidating our heaps of data and stray hypotheses into commanding new theoretical perspectives.

OBSTACLES TO PROGRESS

In attempting to correct this absence of consolidation, the sociology of religion in the U.S. is hampered by several specific obstacles.

Too many sociologists exhibit an incapacity or an unwillingness to learn from other disciplines engaged in the study of religion—anthropology, psychology, literary criticism (hermeneutics,) history, and even philosophy and theology.

There continues to be an over-reliance on survey research and quantitative analysis in the discipline. Attitude surveys are not always the apt instrument for studying religion and little attention has been given to the limitations of survey research. Such surveys are most valuable when they are repeated over time and in various locations. True replication provides a check on both validity and reliability and enables us to widen the generality of our interpretations. Longitudinal data provide us with information about changes in people's attitudes over time and enable us to make conclusions about long- or short-term trends. The use of in-depth interviews and field research appears to be a lost art, even though both carry a special relevance to the study of religious belief and behavior. The implied assumption, unfortunately shared by all too many religious survey researchers, is that religious belief provides people with a coherent system of meaning. I do not question the assertion that beliefs respond to man's need to find or impose meaning, but the attribution of meaning is a pragmatic activity. So long as people have group support or share conventional assumptions that help to make sense of their world, they seem able to tolerate all sorts of contradictions and hiatuses in their beliefs. They behave *as if* life were underpinned by beliefs, but they do not work them out into coherent verbalized philosophies or theologies. In short, *system*, if by that we mean logically coherent patterns, may be exactly the wrong word to use about religious belief. Belief is more like a patch-work quilt or much-mended net than a system; it operates most of the time as an implicit attribution of "sense" to the way things are in the world. Even when some element like formal propositions has a part to play, it may not take the form of a consistent single system of meaning. It is this dimension of *implicit* belief, as well as the doubts and uncertainties that co-exist with belief, which is most likely to remain untouched by questionnaires or pre-packaged propositions. For these reasons we need more *qualitative* data in the sociology of religion, and at the very least, research designs that combine questionnaire surveys with some kind of selective in-depth interviews and

participant observation.

We continued to be hampered by the unanswerable definitional controversy over whether religion need to involve a "transcendental referent." I submit that the issue is principally empirical rather than theoretical, and that any definition of religion which excludes wide areas of "religion-like" behavior from consideration on *a priori* grounds is of no benefit either to the development of theory or to empirical researchers.

Like many other social theorists, those who construct theories in the sociology of religion are unduly harrassed by the search for parsimony. I am prepared to concede (in principle) the advantage of elegant and parsimonious models, but given the fact that some respected colleagues in econometrics think that a parsimonious model can include eighty or ninety variables, I think we ought to be reluctant to impose *a priori* any limit on the number of propositions which are acceptable in a sociological theory of religion.

Finally, we are seriously hampered by the absence of a macro-sociological perspective in much of the sociology of religion. Since this issue closely touches the very nature of the discipline, I want to devote more attention to it in the concluding section of this paper.

THE CHALLENGE OF MACROSOCIOLOGY

What, after all, is the proper object of sociological inquiry? Individual attitudes and behavior, beliefs and practice, meaning and belonging? Concern with religion among both European and American sociologists was originally rooted in the study of social change and social solidarity, interest in local communities, and recognition of the importance of "mediating structures" that link individuals to the larger society and provide meaning and identity to both individual and collective experience. For early American sociology in particular, interest in religion was an inherent part of the study of ethnic and communal relations and the shifting patterns of urban life. For these scholars, acculturation and assimilation never meant giving up individual and group identity, and for most

ethnic groups in America, religion was seen as a constitutive element in group identity. In responding to man's need for continuity and meaning in social life, religion provided a frame of words, images, rituals, and obligations within which people experienced and related, built and uprooted. Much of this larger context has been forgotten in the developing research in the sociology of religion. As a result, the study of religion has come to be a matter of only peripheral concern to the discipline at large.

This marginalization of the sociology of religion, I submit, represents a serious loss not only to sociology of religion itself, but to the discipline of sociology as a whole. *A principal justification for the sociology of religion rests on the premise that religion supplies a focus for the study of total societies.* Put differently, the power of the sociological study of religion lies precisely in its specialized perspective. It highlights the distinctive and reciprocal consequences of changes in the wider society on basic forms of value, identity, and belonging, and especially on the socialization of successive generations. Social research on religion requires the sociologist to identify the real and symbolic boundaries in which people find meaning and proceed through the life cycle. Such research thus confronts the classic dilemma of sociology: how are the social structures and cultures intermediate between the naked individual and the impersonal grid of the bureaucratic state to be maintained? Religion is one of the essential infrastructures which can either support or corrode the total society. To speak of changes in occupational structure, social stratification, or the patterns of urban settlement without referring to the variety of religious frameworks within which people find meaning is fundamentally to distort one's analysis of the social organization of an advanced industrial society.

Religion, after all, concerns not merely transcendent values and ultimate meanings, but organization and territory as well; therein lies its peculiar social impact. In the U.S., for example, churches and synagogues cannot operate simply as voluntary associations like the Community Chest or the Arts Council. Religion is neces-

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sarily tied to locality. As a result, one central question facing religious organizations in countries like the U.S. is: how can religion contribute to the social fabric of local communities within a modern industrial society? A major issue, then, is whether the changes that have transformed "natural" urban areas into specialized communities of limited liability can be articulated into the social life of local community institutions so as to both maintain elements of religious tradition which have sustained immigrants through their acculturation and to expand on what was unique in each religion's contribution to American society.

Nor does religion deal merely with private life; it plays a critical and distinctive role in the ordering of society at the local level. Although some specifically religious activities have become largely private in a situation of social and cultural pluralism, religious values infiltrate and influence public thought in many complex ways. In the U.S., for example, in public areas relevant to everyday life—health, social service, education—the historical development of programs, ideas, and institutions is inseparable from the church; in some parts of the country, particularly the older cities of the Northeast, most social welfare services still operate under religious auspices. Again, taking the U.S. as an illustration, today's danger is not that churches, or any single church, will take over the state. The more real danger is that the state will take over the functions of the church, except for the most narrowly construed definition of religion, limited to worship and religious instruction. This clearly has been the pattern followed in absolutist nation-states because of the tremendous centripetal force of a unitary organization and consciousness. Continued pluralism, especially religious pluralism, is one of the few strong obstacles to that pattern's success in the U. S.

In confronting such threatening trends, the question remains: how does religion as a social institution contribute to the process of community building? Religious traditions are not static; the effectiveness of religious traditions depends on their adaptations to the contemporary scene. Innovation in tradition has not in

the past come from those segments of the population who are defensively orthodox. Nor is it likely to do so today, or in the future. Certainly religious institutions and groups have responded to crucial community needs in the past. This contribution is even more important (in the U.S. at least) in today's more specialized and differentiated residential communities.

In confronting these and other substantive issues in the development of society and in the modernization of religious tradition, we are not dealing with a problem of social engineering. The process of adaptive change is one of searching for new elements of the transcendent. This requires listening with a "third ear" to the symbolic and moral content of existing religious traditions which resonates with the contemporary scene. It must be an exercise that looks forward as well as backward. As such, it is surely pertinent to the present inquiry of the sociology of religion. In the end, the sociology of religion itself will progress in the U.S. and elsewhere only to the extent that it does not lose sight of its macro-sociological mission.