

The Academic Position of the Sociology of Religion in Modern Science

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION TO SOCIOLOGY

From the very beginning of the development of sociology, religion was recognized to be a social phenomenon of the utmost importance. It would not perhaps be too much to say that the founders of sociology, Auguste Comte and, in some measure, his immediate predecessor, Henri de Saint-Simon, saw the new science, which Comte designated "sociology," as a replacement of the theological interpretation of social phenomena. Before the new science arose, theology, or at a more popular level, religion, had been the inevitable, albeit erroneous, basis for man's comprehension of society (and, indeed, of nature). For Comte, the most complete expression of religion was, of course, Christianity, and, more specifically, Roman Catholicism.¹ In that tradition, the total environment had been not merely viewed religiously (for that occurred even in primitive religion) but also elaborately explained in terms that made God the central point of reference. From God stemmed the cosmos and the natural order, and the social and moral order. Christianity had canvassed a God-centered understanding of creation. God had created

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1. Comte's thought is set out in Comte 1830-42. Still a useful introduction is John Stuart Mill 1961. See also E. E. Evans-Pritchard 1970.

the earth, and the earth was the center of the cosmic stage, for the benefit of which (and more specifically for the benefit of mankind) the sun, moon, and stars, had been specifically created. Man was the pinnacle of God's creation, and man's affairs, his history, his corruption and his redemption, were the central preoccupations of religious faith: man's history was the outworking of God's providence. Within the framework of this theological scheme, God's will, man's duty, the social fabric, and the conduct of social relationships were all encompassed. Christian theology, then, had been a rudimentary explanation and legitimation of the social system. In the context of what purported to be fact, were embraced the prescriptions and injunctions that rested on a fundamental system of value-judgments: and at the center of it all was God.

It was the undermining of the old religious conception of the natural order that permitted the attempt of the early sociologists to put forward an alternative to the theological conception of the social order—and indeed to suggest that, in the past, man had necessarily been committed to a religious *Weltanschauung*. God was now divested of his central position in social and moral concerns: human affairs were to be ordered no longer for God's pleasure but solely for man's welfare. Science was to be recognized as a system of human knowledge, and knowledge must be empirical and positivist. In Comte's formulation, the way in which man perceived the world was the basis on which social organization rested. As man's way of perceiving the world changed, from the theological to the positivistic perspective, so the social order would also change.

To divest theology of its claim to be the fundamental discipline and queen of the sciences was, despite the increasing independence of the natural sciences, not easy in the social realm. To describe his new science of morals and politics, Saint-Simon had to resort to the designation "the new Christianity" in order to convey the idea that, different as were his premises, none the less, his concerns were similar to those rooted in religious ideas

of society and morality. How were the deep-laid and implicitly religious elements of interpretation to be discarded whilst retaining the fundamental concern with issues and subject matter which had, hitherto, been conceivable, only in religious terms? Clearly, the new science of society was to be built on the model of older (natural) sciences, even though it was to concern itself with the subject-matter of religion and the humanities. The process which Comte discerned in history, a process of changing human consciousness, must now be made self-conscious: men must be brought to an awareness of how their view of the world had changed, and this knowledge in itself would lead to the acceleration of this process and so bring men to a conscious positivism. From primitive fetishism to modern science was the process that Comte sought to make evident. It had occurred in the natural sciences, and it must now follow in the social sciences. In the new science of society, sociology, factual observation, detached, objective, empiricism would displace metaphysical speculation. Sociology would be as neutral as physics. Ultimate questions would be abandoned as meaningless, and knowledge would take human welfare as its final concern. Humanity was to be deity, and altruism the rule of life.

The position adopted by Comte towards religion did not, of course, continue to be the exclusive orientation of sociology. But it has been necessary to recall Comte's perspective since it reveals the sources of tension between the claims of sociology (and hence of the sociology of religion) to be scientific when confronting a *Weltanschauung* that is patently normative, arbitrary, and metaphysical, and which exploits the mythical, the ritualistic, and the emotional. In this stark contrast of orientations, repose some of the continuing difficulties of the sociology of religion. But precisely because religion had, in the pre-scientific ages, been so central to both social organization and human consciousness, and because it was now so strongly the focus of challenge—first in the very assumption that society could be organized on, and human consciousness informed by, other principles; and second

in the contrast of methodology that sociology presented to religion—so religion has remained of much more importance to sociological enquiry than any other institutional area of society.

SUBSEQUENT sociologists did not escape involvement in the issues raised by Comte's program for the replacement of religion by positivist sociology. His immediate successors were less stridently positivistic, but the goal of self-direction for society remained in the writings of Herbert Spencer and L. T. Hobhouse, with industrial development as its principal facilitating agency.² In America—a self-constituted new society in which optimism and faith in an improving social order was fed by buoyant expansion—the ideological thrust of sociology against religion was muted. There, indeed, sociology was used as a prop for the social gospel, and religious voluntarism became in itself almost an evidence of commitment to social good in the sociological sense. Much as the practical positivism of Comte was consonant with American pragmatism, his ideological rejection of religion was usually ignored. The theoretical implications for religion of Comtean sociology were not squarely faced, even though Comte's ideas were taught in some American universities, and even though sociology became institutionally established there long before any such development occurred in Europe. Outside the universities, however, critical sociological thinking steadily developed and progressed in Europe, and since, in European countries, religion was officially endorsed, critical and dissenting attitudes towards the churches flourished among the intellectuals. The scientific attitude was acceptable not only in practice (as in America) but also in theory, and what Peter Berger has called "methodological atheism" was embraced as the appropriate posture of sociologists towards religion. Such a stance is evident in the

2. See Herbert Spencer 1900, and Spencer 1885-96; L. T. Hobhouse 1915 and 1924.

work of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.³ For each of them, religion was to be not only explained, but also to be “explained away.” For Marx, religion was mystification, a manifestation of false consciousness, to be explained as a search by men for compensation in their misery, and as an agency of social control deployed by the ruling classes in the class struggle. For Freud, religion was an institutionalized mass neurosis. Even though he acknowledged that designating it as such would do nothing to relieve man of his irrational psychological dispositions, by therapy men might realize the nature of their dependence on the illusory quality of religious fictions, which they had constructed for their own self-protection. Marx, concerned with his own science of society, said little of the mystification that Marxism was expected to disperse, but Freud, whenever he turned from his clinical cases to an analysis of society turned recurrently to an extended discussion of religion. Religion was a key issue in understanding social and human consciousness, and their pathologies.

Within the Comtean, Marxist and Freudian approaches to religion there was contained an unresolved issue of tension. All three writers, together with those who later claimed to adopt the same intellectual positions, sought to be scientific in their analyses of society: the science of society was the watchword of both Comte and Marx. Science implied detachment, objectivity, and ethical neutrality; for Comte and his successors, this was indeed the vital feature of sociology. Yet, in all these traditions the science of society was regarded as emerging in order to dislodge the religious conceptions of man and the world by which

3. The references to religion in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are numerous, often fragmentary, and dispersed: the reader is advised to consult the index of their collected works. Freud's work on religion is also widely diffused through his work, but see especially Freud 1953-74a, b, and c. For a general commentary, see Philip Rieff 1959 and 1966. For a contemporary application of psychanalytic insight into religion, see C. R. Badcock 1980.

mankind had previously governed social affairs. Thus, there persisted a certain animus against religion, whilst, at the same time, the claim was made that sociologists viewed society with detachment and according to the canons of value-freedom. Thus, sociology was in its nature set over against a religious worldview, in which cognitive, evaluative, and affective elements were inevitably intertwined. Sociology sharply pointed out the defectiveness of an orientation which not only purported to describe the facts of the world and its order, but which simultaneously prescribed the attitudes, feelings, and evaluations with which man should regard those supposed "facts." By its very detachment and objectivity, sociology offered an alternative scientific view. Yet, we may ask, how was that scientific stance to be sustained: how might sociology maintain a neutral attitude towards religion when, at the same time, it sought to discredit it?

This issue of tension in the sociology of religion has never been entirely dispelled, even though as sociologists became more circumspect in their claims, and as they came increasingly to document the decline of religion as a purely sociological process (and not as a declaration of a sociological manifesto), so they ceased to present sociology as itself an alternative source of prescription for social order. Yet, since this stance had been so emphatic in Comte's work, sociology was from the beginning engaged with the question of religion. Later sociologists, even if completely free from the Comtean vision of an applied science of society, nonetheless, necessarily needed to explain the role of religion in society, and the causes and circumstances of the changes in that role. To comprehend the nature of social development, sociologists needed to interpret the functions of religion in societies of the past.

THUS, the classical sociologists of the early twentieth century were as much preoccupied with the sociology of religion as Comte had been. Max Weber in his attempt to explain the reasons for the development of Western rationality, and of cap-

italism, the economic system which so completely embraced the principles of formal rationality, turned to religion as the source of value systems that determine social organization.⁴ To religion he ascribed a powerful role in social development, even though he believed that religion was no longer the sustaining force of Western economic social order. If Weber is the most distinguished among sociologists, he is so largely because of the subtlety of his analysis of religion. Much the same point might be made of Émile Durkheim, whose distinction as a sociologist is second only to that of Weber.⁵ We owe to him the pioneer analysis of the latent functions which religion fulfilled for society. But Durkheim did not believe that in the future, religion would fulfill the functions that he had ascribed to it in primitive aboriginal Australian societies. In the modern world, religion was virtually defunct, and if its important functions were to be fulfilled, then, he believed, other agencies would be required to subserve them. He looked in turn to various social institutions, and came to believe that only the school and professional associations—restored to something like the form of medieval guild organizations—could establish normative consensus in modern, complex industrial society with its elaborate division of labor. In many ways, Durkheim's life work was an exploration in search of rational structures to supply the latent functions that had, in preliterate societies, been fulfilled by religion. He sought by rational means to define agencies that would provide consciously all the erstwhile *unintended* consequences—the latent functions—of the irrational.

Implicit in his analysis was the assumption that advanced society was becoming increasingly rational in its organization, and this must lead to the diminution of the influence of religion. At the same time, Durkheim believed that society needed agencies

4. Max Weber's works have been translated into English in various versions.

The most important items for this discussion are Weber 1920–21 and 1925.

5. See Durkheim 1954. A useful compilation is Pickering 1975; see also Lukes 1975.

that subserved consensus, and these had, in the past, been supplied by religion. It had provided the over-arching values and the normative order by which society was rendered cohesive. The new agencies that must be found to fulfill what he took to be indispensable functions, would, of necessity, be *consciously* instituted to this end. Thus, the course of social development was the process by which latent functions were made into manifest functions and since they were manifest they must therefore become the object of conscious and deliberate planning. Although Durkheim's thought went far beyond that of Comte, there is here, nonetheless, and even if expressed in a somewhat different way, Comte's old assumption that sociology might itself become the body of knowledge which informed social organization and social planning. Sociology was still seen as the exemplification of a self-consciously rational interpretation of social life, which was destined, both as part of social evolution and by virtue of the more developed consciousness about social organization, to displace religion as the source of values. Society would discover, or rather create, a rational ethic.

Clearly, even among the functionalists, who were disposed to make explicit the positive value of religion for society, the tension to which we have already alluded, between sociology's claim to be a strict scientific stance of ethical neutrality, and its virtual "take-over bid" of religion's erstwhile functions, continued to exist. Among Durkheim's functionalist successors, for example Kingsley Davis, the view prevailed that while religion had been a useful fiction for society (and might to some extent continue as a useful fiction), there was a self-evident disjunction between what was good and what was true. For him religion was patently false: it persisted because it was socially valuable (see Davis 1948, especially pp. 509-548).

Functionalism remains one of the most dominant perspectives of sociology, and it has had a special appeal for sociologists of religion since it provides, by exposing latent functions, a basis for explaining the persistence of the non-rational facets of social

life.⁶ Functionalism “makes sense” of arbitrary, empirically-unprovable teachings (myths), and of the persistence of equally arbitrary prescribed practices (rituals). Not all functionalists endorse the view of Davis that religion is a useful fiction: for some, the utility of religion to society might be taken as the basis of its justification; but for many, functionalism accounts for the apparently arbitrary, and certainly diverse, bodies of religious theory, belief and practice, for each single traditional corpus of which the claim is made that it is true (and sometimes that it is uniquely true). Yet, it must also be acknowledged that the sociologists of other schools, who explain religion by reference to its social provenance and distribution, embrace theories that may also imply that religious phenomena may be “explained away.” Thus, Charles Y. Glock, who has developed the *relative deprivation thesis*, sees religion as virtually a compensatory response of deprived people.⁷ The response is likely to be differentially manifested according to the measure and kind of deprivation felt by specific groups within the total population. Those with the strongest sense of deprivation (relative to the facilities or competences enjoyed by others, or relative to their own earlier expectations of their own future prospects) were the most likely, according to this thesis, to embrace religion (or to embrace it more intensely)—and religion of a type calculated to compensate them for the specific sort of deprivation from which they suffered (or from which they believed themselves to suffer).

The classical sociological authors came near to saying that men had evolved religion as a way of explaining things to themselves, just as Durkheim suggested that the concept of deity was an unconscious attempt to represent, and to objectify in symbolic terms, society to itself. They believed that with the disassociation of

6. On functionalism, see among other items Kingsley Davis 1959; Robert K. Merton 1957, especially pp. 20–84; Llewellyn Gross 1959, especially pp. 241–307; and W. W. Isajiw 1968.

7. See, for the early statement of this thesis, Charles Y. Glock 1964, and for its implementation in research see Glock, Ringer and Babbie 1967.

facts from values, and with the growth of empirical science and its objective techniques, religion would no longer be able to fulfill its earlier social functions. At the intellectual level, religious accounts of man, his world, and his prospects were shown to be deficient by the superior techniques of science. At the evaluative level, some of the early sociologists made their own assumptions about the future source of social values. Some of them, elaborating their own codes, openly incorporated (like Hobhouse) or covertly smuggled (perhaps like Durkheim) a rational ethic into the projection of society's (and sociology's) future order.

At the emotional level, where this became an explicit concern, it was assumed that here, too, reason would itself come to master the passions, that in place of the techniques of socialization prompted by religious systems (which were effective but which were based on erroneous assumptions) would be created patterns of socialization that rested on reason or therapy. The "reason" invoked was the logic of history for a Marx; the consciousness accretion of affectivity to self-conscious conceptions of duty, as in Durkheim; and therapy was, of course, the one possibility of escape from the impasse that was allowed by Freudian theory. Weber alone left these issues poised on the knife-edge of his own acute and sensitive ambivalence, implying that modern man could no longer (intellectually) live with religion, whilst acknowledging that it was far from clear—once in the grip of the irrationalities of formal rationality—that he could live without it.

YET, despite all of this, it must be clear that religion was a subject at the heart of classical sociological theory, and it remains true today that it continues to be at the core of the discipline. Since religion has been regarded by the sociologists as a "pre-sociological" theory of society, then the sociology of religion as such must inevitably be a discipline in which central epistemological questions are at issue. And even though these concerns do not always become evident in, for instance, the sometimes unduly positivistic procedures of contemporary empirical sociologists

of religion, they remain as the philosophical background of any interpretative statement about culture, knowledge, socialization, meaning, order—indeed of all the central questions of sociology *per se*.

Religion is not merely (and not necessarily primarily) an intellectual statement of the pre-requisites of social order. It fulfilled its functions for society by summoning evaluative and affective dispositions, and by diffusing appropriate motivations, so encompassing a very wide range of human experience. It had affinities with art and poetry and the whole imaginative, creative realm of man's being. It stimulated, channelled and regulated basic human emotions. It elicited sympathy, altruism, and love, intimating minute and often subtle desiderata that have shaped human comportment. The sociologist is necessarily concerned with such matters as social control, social consensus, the evocation of goodwill in human relations, and the maintenance of an appropriate balance in the expression of human emotions. All of these things have, in greater or lesser degree, been focused in religious activity, and religions have generally prescribed the evaluations that men should endorse towards various facets of their human experience. Whilst the higher religions at their most elevated and philosophical levels may provide a set of intellectual propositions that answer (in the religion's own terms—which are not terms that need convince an outsider) "ultimate questions," practical religion, religion at the everyday level, has been pre-occupied with other issues. Ultimate answers may indeed be an unimportant part of the functions of religion in many societies, and even in other societies, these ultimate concerns may be of limited consequence in the everyday life circumstances of those who, nominally, embrace the teachings of one of the higher religions. The social significance of religion has rather lain in the provision of categories and symbols that facilitate simultaneously man's comprehension of his circumstances and his capacity to evaluate them and to cope with them emotionally. Thus it is that religious language, unlike scientific language, is often highly

ambiguous, seeking to denote and to evoke simultaneously, providing not only descriptions but also evaluations and summoning and sustaining particular types of emotional response. Religious language is at once a repertoire of supposedly objective categories, a storehouse of values, and a battery of manipulative symbols.

Sociology sought—and still seeks—to explain religion, and to do so in essentially scientific terms. The sociologist's interest in values is to regard them as data: other men's values are the sociologist's facts. Even though later sociologists were less sanguine than Comte, Hobhouse, and even Durkheim, that sociology would in the future be able to square the circle by providing a strictly rational basis for values, nonetheless, values, including intimations of the supernatural, metaphysical speculations and ideas, emotional orientations, beliefs, rituals, and patterns of religious socialization and organization, were to be the subject of scientific, sociological enquiry.

SOCIOLOGY AS SCIENCE

The foregoing remarks have sought to establish in some measure the significance of religion as an appropriate—indeed unavoidable—concern for sociology. But clearly, much as sociology as a scientific discipline must be explicitly committed to the maintenance of an adequate body of theory, increasingly sociologists have sought to test elements of theory, and to provide evidence that leads to confirmation or revision. As the facilities for social investigation have improved, both with the development of techniques of enquiry, and with the establishment of university positions from which sociologists might engage in research, so the sociological interest in religion has found increasingly empirical expression. Today, even though the theoretical issues remain important to the sociologist of religion, increasingly the test of the discipline is not in its broad theoretical (and often—it may be admitted—speculative) generalizations, but in the work that is done in the field.

In his field work, the sociologist of religion is necessarily com-

mitted to the same type of scientific procedures that are employed by sociologists in any field. If by a science we mean a discipline in which empirical phenomena are investigated by methods of enquiry that are objective; in which the investigator attempts to maintain a distinct and self-conscious ethical neutrality; in which detachment from the data is maintained; and standard methods of measurement are used, then sociology may be said to be scientific. We may go further and suggest that a science is also characterized by the attempt to develop a rational body of theory in which individual phenomena are related to propositions of greater generality that are described in abstract conceptual language. Concepts are themselves formulations that facilitate the expression and co-ordination of hypothetical propositions that are, in principle, falsifiable. Such propositions may then be tested against empirical data.

In some measure, sociology meets these demands, and certainly these prescriptions have been the model for the development of the discipline. They apply no less to the sociology of religion. Of course, if by science is meant a procedure by controlled experiment, it is clear that sociology is limited in the extent to which it can utilize the techniques of the natural sciences. Not only are there practical difficulties, which I need not discuss, but the whole discipline here meets an ethical barrier which is not merely incidental to this discussion. The ethical barrier indicates the persistence of a sense of human integrity, of the individual's freedom of will, and of society's rights to operate without undue interference from the operation of social scientists. This ethical barrier should alert us to the fact that, in this respect, sociology appears to be in a position different in kind from at least the physical sciences, and different in considerable degree (if not in kind) from the biological sciences. The ethical barrier to the development of strictly scientific procedures in sociology intimates a limitation which the data impose upon the investigators, or, better, which the world imposes on the collection of data. It is a limitation which in itself probably suggests the boundaries beyond

which scientific enquiry cannot go—not because the procedures are impossible, but because we have strong ethical objections to their use. This fact alone intimates the persistence of a significant, perhaps irreducible, value-commitment which suggests that values cannot be entirely explained scientifically, if for no other reason than because we will not allow them to be so explained. At this point the expansion of science meets human resistance, and perhaps here we have an intimation of a possible analogous limitation to the procedures of science in other spheres.

THIS issue aside, however, the sociology of religion is committed, as is any branch of sociology, to the maintenance of a scientific orientation. In this respect it becomes important to recognize just what the sociology of religion seeks to do, and what lies beyond its range of possibilities. In the first place, the sociology of religion takes the formulations of a religious movement, or the religious dispositions of a people, as its point of departure. The statement of beliefs, the prescriptions of ritual, and their basis of legitimation, are all taken as basic data—as phenomena existent at the emergent level from which the sociology of religion must proceed. The sociologist is not concerned to test the “truth” of belief. He is not concerned with the efficacy of rituals. He does not attempt to judge between divergent interpretations of a tradition. All of these things he must accept as part of the data. He proceeds at the emergent social level, with a body of information that must, in the first instance, come from the believers themselves. Whether his interest is in the nature of religious belief, in the appeal of religious teachings or rituals, in the processes of conversion, in the character of organization, the regularity of religious practice, the consequences of becoming religiously committed, the relation of priests to laymen, the style and function of religious legitimation, or whatever else it may be—the sociologist must first take the self-interpretation of religious individuals and groups as the point of departure from which his study begins.

He does not, of course, seek to learn the doctrines of a religion in the same way in which believers seek to learn. He is not going to become a disciple. Were he to do so, he would necessarily cease to be a sociologist. But he should at least seek to understand exactly what it is that a disciple learns, and as far as possible he should seek to understand what *they* understand and should do so in *their* terms. Now clearly, since he is to remain detached and apart, there will inevitably be a gap between the ultimate meaning for him, and the meaning for the believer, of the same formulations. But he can—and indeed must—seek to acquire an empathic understanding of *their* commitment and *their* beliefs. Only if he can gain some apprehension of what it means to be a believer can he say anything useful about the religious movement he studies: and yet, in gaining that understanding, he must not actually become a believer.⁸

It will be apparent that the cultivation of what I call “sympathetic detachment” will always remain a matter of difficulty, and between sympathy and detachment there is a frontier of tension. Mixing with a religious group, a sociologist may feel deeply drawn to them and to their activities, and this may be necessary for the fullest understanding of them. But he must also remember that his brief is to interpret religion sociologically: his values lie in a scientific discipline, and in consequence he must always maintain appropriate distance. It is sometimes objected by religious people that properly to understand a religion one must belong to it. Scholars in any of the disciplines that make religion their object of study cannot accept that. One does not need to be a medieval man to study medieval society, nor a tribesman to understand a tribal group. Indeed, this objection to the sociological study of religion is an objection to the detached and objective approach of any academic discipline. We may, of course, concede the ob-

8. This methodological position may be supported in considerable measure from Max Weber's writings: see two discussions as translated into English in Weber 1949 and 1962.

vious fact that, at one level, the sociologist will never understand as much as does a believer of equal intelligence and perspicacity. At another level, however, since he sees from the outside, he may acquire a much sharper perspective about a religion and about the practices of its adherents than is possible for those who are committed and who can see only from the inside. Thus, at best, the sociologist should be able to add a whole dimension to the understanding of a religious movement which believers themselves could not obtain from their perspective.

In certain ways he will know less than they do: in other ways he will know more. Part of his way of knowing "more" will of course come not only from his objectivity and detachment, but also from the fact that he has access, or should have access, to a wider body of information about other comparable religious movements. Comparison is a fundamental requirement of sociological method. From comparisons arise hypotheses of wider generality, and formulations that can transcend, in their abstraction, the circumstances of given cases. Without betraying the peculiarities and particularities of any given movement or any given cultural context, the sociologist should be able to gain some useful interpretative insight from an examination of comparable cases, and from the generalizations that his colleagues and teachers have already established with respect to them.

A number of problems arise from the distinctive stance adopted by the sociologist of religion, not all of which can be easily resolved. The basic problem for the investigator is implicit in his role: sympathy and detachment are not easily balanced. The demand for such balance may be a problem that is culturally more acute in the West than it is in the Far East. In the West, religious intolerance has been more pronounced, and for long periods of Western history neither heretics nor agnostics were safe from religious persecution. Although such times have passed, there persists a residue of very high sensitivity on religious issues. Perhaps, in some Oriental cultures, in which more diffuse religious attitudes prevail, and in which different religious traditions co-

exist, merge, or persist in symbiotic relationship, the prospect of achieving sympathetic detachment, and of being credited with it both by believers and others, is very much greater.

THERE are other problems which are often very much associated with one another in practice, but which, for analytical purposes, we may treat separately. First, the application of scientific procedures to human phenomena presents difficulties. The religious participants feel deeply about their faith. In some respects, it is for them not only the true interpretation of life, but it is also inextricably part of life itself. Life is lived according to the dictates of the truth as they see it, and, in consequence, their religion becomes, for seriously committed people, what life is about. Obviously, for the sociologist of religion, the religious movement and its members are a subject matter that constitute sociological phenomena. But no sociologist would succeed in studying religion were he not to appreciate the profound seriousness of religion to its adherents. He cannot therefore be casually clinical in the way that, for example, medical men sometimes appear to be casual in their clinical view of their cases. Furthermore, the measure of his seriousness, in a sense of his dedication (even though it is dedication to his discipline—the sociology of religion—and not to religion *per se*), is quickly appraised by those whom he seeks as informants and respondents.

Arising from this problem is the fact that scientific procedures may easily appear profane in the context of religion. Usually, people will much more readily discuss their leisure-time pursuits, their work and industrial relations, their problems arising from ecological and urban development, their political opinions, and even their familial, kinship and sexual relationships and activities, than their religious dispositions and beliefs. This very sensitivity in the area of enquiry—which is perhaps more evident in some respects in the West—presents the sociologist of religion with a delicate problem in the conduct of his research. Not only must his attitude be much more delicately attuned to the

expectations of his respondents than is the case in most other sociological research, but it is likely that many of the methods of enquiry used by sociologists in other fields are unavailable to him, or are usable only with great circumspection.

Above all, he must avoid the impression of using methods that appear to trivialize, disparage, or relativize the activities of his respondents. If he uses interview procedures in order to discover something about religious believers, he must check his instruments of research with respect to the language that he uses, the appropriateness of his questions, and the implications that his questions might appear to carry to others who are unacquainted with his purposes, or who do not accept them. In some respects, the interview is by far the best of the specifically sociological instruments available. It provides face-to-face contact between the sociologist and respondent, and, providing the sociologist has some skill in inter-personal relationships, this opportunity in itself should allow him to dispel the doubts that his respondents may possibly entertain.

Interviews are, however, extremely time-consuming in themselves, and the yield from long periods of work is inevitably small. Sociology in general may be described as a "distilling discipline" in the sense that it takes a mass of individual facts, and from them produces generalizations which are, inevitably, expressed in summary fashion. Large quantities of data are reduced, either by statistics or by theoretical formulations, into relatively concise propositions. In the case of the interview, the same distilling process is evident. Many interviews create a certain impression, and these impressions may be represented, perhaps in codified form, in very much shorter space and time than was involved in the eliciting of the information. There is a further problem involved, however: the yield from the interviewing relative to the time expended is disappointingly small, and because, to be manageable, interviews are usually few in number, the statement of summarized interview findings may appear to be drawn from an insufficient basis of material and to be unduly subjective.

Since his data are often so slender, and his interpretations so easily challenged, the sociologist of religion has to be unusually conscious of the need to maintain in the forefront of his mind the canons of objectivity.

Although this problem is not in the last analysis resolvable, alternative procedures in the sociology of religion are even more deficient. Questionnaires have limited value. They are useful for gathering gross data (age, sex, social position, occupation, education, etc.) but since religion is a very personal matter and always of great seriousness, to elicit information by impersonal means is to run the risk that one's enquiries may be interpreted as a type of profanation—a consequence that is much less likely when information is elicited by personal interview. Many data are themselves too complex to be elicited by questionnaire, in any case, and the room for misunderstandings at both factual and intentional levels is considerable. Religion is a field in which quantification is particularly vulnerable to objection. It is not easy, except with the expression of simple and sometimes crude statements, to quantify the religious beliefs and dispositions of a particular population. It is quite impossible by these methods alone to interpret either religious belief or practice in its cultural and social meaning. Thus, methods that are normal in sociological enquiry in other areas of life and social organization have more limited application in the sociology of religion.

LIMITATIONS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Lying behind these problems with respect to specifically sociological methods, are problems that relate to interpretation of the religious phenomena. For believers, it may well appear to be the case that no purely scientific representation can be adequate for their religion. In part, sociologists recognize this, and it is evident that sociological language is much more precise when dealing with systems that can be represented impersonally such as bureaucracies, organizations, patterns of kinship, role systems, authority structures, and the like, than when seeking to com-

municate the distinctive qualities of religious movements and religious assemblies. Of course, the sociologists of religion are also interested in religious roles, authority, organization, and so on, but when all these elements have been explored and explained, there remains a variety of elements that are not so easily described in sociological language, and these are perhaps central features of religion in that they have to do with community and affectivity.

A full appreciation of religious groups in the modern world depends not only upon an acquaintance with atmosphere, ethos, collective feeling, uplift, and inspiration, but on perceptive sensitivity to these things. "Atmosphere," "ethos," "collective response" and so on are not very sociological words, and it is not uncommon for sociologists when seeking to convey something of the ambiance of a religious assembly or the expressive culture of a particular group to resort to what might be described as literary techniques of presentation, description which conveys by the use of emotive terms and impressions more than can be conveyed by the strictly neutral jargon and clinical language of the subject. Ultimately, the religiously-committed many may not accept these literary devices as capable of conveying anything of what they may regard as inexpressible elements of their religious culture. When the religiously committed person says, "You must belong to it to understand it," or "You must feel it to know what it is really about," the honest sociologist of religion knows that, at one level at least, these remarks are true.

Quite apart from the attempt to convey the distinctive character of a religious movement and its believers, there are problems that arise between sociologists and believers in the analysis by which sociologists seek to explain religious phenomena. To take only one important example, the sociologist will necessarily have in mind comparative cases when considering the development, general belief system, social composition, and social activities of any religious movement. He will wish to examine a movement with the implicit understanding which he brings to each given

case, and knowledge which is drawn from other movements or from other cultures. This is an implicit element of sociological procedure: comparison is vital to it. But there is a sense in which comparison must be odorous to the committed adherents of any religion. Each religion is claimed as the most complete system and expression of ultimate truth, with warranted and necessary practices, and complete legitimation. This is more emphatically the case in the West, where religions have arisen in hostility to each other, and where exclusivism has been the norm. Adherents know, of course, that their own faith is not the only one that has claimed to possess the unique and universal truth, or at least to present a full expression of the truth which in other religions is understood at best partially: nonetheless, the idea that different movements might be examined in impartial comparison, is not the one that commends itself to religious believers. Here the divergent value orientations of the adherent and the sociologist become apparent, and the adherent is here called upon to display a tolerance about sociological investigation which his own religious commitment may make difficult. There is no final solution to this problem for exclusivistic religions, even though in practice this point is not always pressed.

The intrinsic claims of a religion cannot be represented by the sociologist as direct first-order statements to his own public. He must say, the members of religion X claim so-and-so. If he is careless in his formulation of their self-claim he may find himself in difficulty—and regarded as in some sense hostile to the movement he has been studying. Some years ago, I had to write a short *Encyclopaedia* article about Mormonism.⁹ I said that the movement began in the United States in about 1830. That proposition is accepted by all non-Mormons, and might be tolerated even by Mormons, but to some very deeply-committed Mormons, it was a misstatement: they claimed that their religion was at that time simply “re-founded” after its extinction for

9. This article appears in the current edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

centuries. Clearly, if adherents are adamant that the movement's self-claims are the absolute truth, and beyond compromise, even for the benefit of a public which is uninstructed in it, the sociologist of religion will find himself in a position of unsurmountable difficulty.

The sociologist's terms of reference are to locate religion in its wider social context. His framework of explanation is bounded by the parameters of the society, by the social facts concerning the emergence of a particular set of religious ideas and practices, and the social composition of adherents. Clearly, part of the sociologist's work must be historical, and he may be interested in any of the usual historical issues—the provenance of particular ideas; the continuities or discontinuities in religious practice; the development of specific styles of religious organization; the impress of the secular society on the development of religion, and the effect of religion on the development of secular society; the origin and diffusion of a religious ethic; the extent to which religious commitment can be transferred generationally; the processes of conversion and persuasion; the relationship of magical to ethical percepts; the relationship of religious movements to one another; the degree of localization of religious conceptions of the cosmos or the *nomos*; the process of religious unification and division, and so on. Even if full answers are obtained to all of these questions about the social dimensions of religion, it must be clear that the richness of religious phenomena is not exhausted. There are other levels of apprehension of religious information. There is the question of the mainsprings of commitment and its meaning to the believer.

SOME of the issues that are raised in the sociology of religion border the territory claimed by psychology, but there are, despite appearances, distinct differences of approach. The sociology of religion may proceed (although it has not always done so) according

to the canons of methodological individualism.¹⁰ However, even when it does so, it does not become an exercise in psychology. The concern with motivations in the sociology of religion is concern with “typical” patterns of motivation as these might be located in terms of significant sociological variables—social class, education, sex, etc. It is not an attempt to provide an aetiology of motives.

Thus one can move, as Max Weber moved with consummate skill, from the discussion of the social ethic of a religious movement to a reconstruction of patterns of motivation among adherents. One can see a plausible psychological configuration which offers explanation of the individual's response to particular social pressures, but which does not *reduce* the social to distinctly or specifically psychological facts. Even where the discourse entails a hypothesization of individual motives, it is the social probability of these connections that matters, not the psychological determinants *per se*.

If the sociology of religion is not to be reduced to psychology, neither is it to be regarded as merely a branch of what is often called comparative religion, or *Religionswissenschaft*, even though comparison is very much part of its method. A sociologist's approach differs from what I take to be that of comparative religionists¹¹ because the sociologist has ultimate commitment to explain religion by reference to broad theoretical propositions about society. Religion is taken as a social fact, and the sociologist is not concerned merely to describe or expound the beliefs, practices, artifacts, doctrines, and organization of religion, intrinsically interesting as they may be. He seeks to find, beneath the overlay of specific cultural style and content, social structural principles. Sociology as we have said, is a *distilling* discipline—and this not only with reference to the reduction of large bodies of detailed

10. For discussion of methodological individualism, see Sir Karl Popper 1945 and 1957; see the useful discussion in Lukes 1973, especially pp. 110–122.

11. I take as a representative recent example of the discipline of *Religionswissenschaft* the account of Jacques Waardenburg 1978.

facts by analytical procedures, but also in the reduction of diverse cultural elements to theoretical statements which are set out in relatively abstract terms, and which set out fundamental relationships. Clearly, the lengths to which this procedure is taken must differ with the explanatory purpose being pursued, and I for my part should not wish to advocate abstract theory merely for its own sake. Nonetheless, the thrust of the discipline is clear: comparison is a method and not an object for the sociology of religion.

We may mark a similar distinction between the sociologist and the phenomenologist. The phenomenologist appears to regard facts as a good in their own right, seeking to set out faithfully—and with an objectivity to which the sociologist also aspires—the details of specific religious phenomena. Many of these details are, of necessity, social in character, and to this extent part of the work of these two types of investigators may overlap. But as a sociologist sees it, the phenomenologist may sometimes be in danger of supposing that the facts “speak for themselves.” He may forget that practices and beliefs carry implicit meanings which are culturally specific, and these meanings are an order of data which the sociologist seeks to explore. The unwillingness of the phenomenologist to structure his data and to select his material, contrasts with the sociologist’s insistence that, by any standards, selectivity occurs in every academic and scientific enquiry, and since it must occur, then it had better be undertaken with deliberate and conscious intent, and according to principles that are themselves open to critical evaluation and reevaluation.

The sociologist makes conscious decisions about the relevance of particular items of fact, and indeed about whole orders of factual information: he is aware that he must make judgments of value-relevance. He structures his information, aware that to do so is to jeopardize the canons of objectivity that he jealously seeks to preserve. His safeguards in this operation lie essentially in his self-consciousness about the process in which he is engaged, in his sustained self-criticism about his assumptions and methods

and in his awareness that analysis must vary according to his pre-conceived ideas about the research. Thus it is that sociologists often spend a great deal of time elaborating their methodological procedures, to the point, at times, of becoming unduly obsessive about them. The point, however, is clear: since facts have to be selected, better that such selection be conscious and deliberate and subject to criticism.

Finally the sociologist must also recognize that no exercise in sociological analysis is to be regarded as in any sense definitive: the assumptions, procedures, and methods employed in any given investigation may all be amended or abandoned in favor of better ones in any subsequent research enquiry. In this way the balance might be struck between the commitment to scientific objectivity and the need to avoid crude positivism. Because his data are not only phenomenological fact, but include the values of those who, as a first-order experience, deal with these facts, the sociologist needs to see his role as implicitly and unavoidably interpretative. Recognizing his own interpretative role, he seeks also to account for the interpretations that are made by the participants in all social—and all religious—life.

Clearly, sociology is not a form of theological apologetics, even though the development of what was sometimes called sociology occurred among some Christian clergy. Given that sociology developed originally in the context of Christian culture, it would be surprising had this not been the case. The radical anti-theological stance of early sociology was disregarded by these clerics, of course, and what emerged, particularly in France and Belgium, under the label of *sociologie religieuse*,¹² was a type of sociography, pursued with specific problems of pastoral theology in mind. These religiously-committed sociologists sought principally to trace the patterns of Christian influence in society, in relation, for example, to industrialization, and to discover the connections

12. The doyen of this school was Gabriel Le Bras. For a recent example of its work see F. Boulard 1960.

between geographic patterns of religious practice and specific local historical traditions. These studies fall short of a full-fledged sociology of religion. They do so because their perspectives are usually limited to one religious confession; because they lack a sociological basis of explanatory theory; and because they often have recourse to normative propositions both in discussing historical facts and in their advocacy of church policies and programs. Analysis was started from a point at which Christianity was assumed to be the normal and the incontestable commitment to the discipline. Sociological variables were deployed and statistical findings produced, but there was in this tradition an unwillingness to ask the type of theoretical questions that have appropriately been asked by sociologists of religion—namely, questions about the underlying functions of religious adherence; the differential appeal of religion according to the specifics of particular classes or social groups; and the substitutability of one set of religious beliefs for another, or of secular beliefs and activities for religious ideas and practices. Most practitioners of *sociologie religieuse* were clerics of the Roman Church, but as, in recent decades, the posture of that church has changed, so the distinctiveness of their approach has diminished: *sociologie religieuse* is today a disappearing designation.

One may refer to two signs of the times in this matter. First, some of the institutes of socio-religious research which the churches in Europe (both Catholic and Protestant) supported in the late 1950s and 60s have now ceased to function. Second, the principal international organization of sociologists of religion, *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse*, which, as its name suggests, was founded by Catholic priests who wished to acquire a better understanding of the social influences that operated on their religion, and which their religion exercised in society, has recently decided to change its name to the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie des Religions*. The change is in fact belated in that the CISR has, since the late 1960s, been committed to a thoroughly scientific and academic approach, embracing the highest standards of neu-

tral and objective scholarship. The desire of the leading members to divest the organization from its earlier, specifically Catholic, associations became evident, in 1971, in its election of a new President, who was neither a Catholic nor even a Christian.

THE scientific orientation of the sociology of religion is deliberate. The steady consolidation of this position among those who investigate religion in its social implications has created a sense of distinction between this explicitly professional commitment and the work of religiously-committed commentators which is necessarily regarded as amateur. This is not to say that a sociologist of religion cannot be *personally* a religiously-committed man; that is a possibility. But in his sociological work he must adopt the professional stance of the detached, neutral and objective investigator: and this we may take as a necessary qualification.

Yet, the discipline itself still struggles with an inheritance of cultural bias that has not been entirely expunged—and the last traces of which may, in the nature of things, remain ineradicable. Precisely because the professional stance is now so clearly articulated, it becomes all the more important for sociologists to recognize the existence of these cultural and religiously-inspired predispositions. We have noted that sociology developed as a discipline in the context of Christian culture. Thus, the early conceptions of religion that sociologists entertained were heavily suffused with the ideas, ethos, and atmosphere of Christianity. Nor was this merely a matter of the external and superficial forms of worship and symbols. It very much affected the ideas that sociologists developed concerning the social functions of religion; the extent of penetration of religious consciousness into social life; and the relationship of religion and morality. Some of the basic categories of analysis were all too evidently drawn from Christian theological concepts, such as the distinction between the sacred and the profane; this-worldly and other-worldly; clergy and laity; and orthodoxy and heresy. Other categories, such as particularism and universalism, may have a less tainted prove-

nance, but in their application to the religious field, it was perhaps too easy for sociologists to assume that the Western case—that is, the Christian case—provided the paradigm by which all other cases might be analysed.

The sociology of religion is still in some degree in captivity to its concepts—concepts of Christian provenance. Any external critic must, however, recognize two things: that this is a captivity and not a voluntary commitment; and that at least some sociologists are aware of it. To break completely free may not be possible, since the sociologist needs concepts that “make sense” of new cases and alien instances, and these are necessarily concepts understood within his own fraternity and derived from the cultural context in which that fraternity learned its terms of discourse. He cannot be bound by the concepts, explicit or implicit, of the culture or the religion that he studies, even though he must, perforce, be thoroughly acquainted with them. His task is, after all, to “translate” these into the language of his discipline, even though that language, too, is culturally conditioned. Of course, he must, as we have said, first understand, both rationally and emphatically, the meanings and purposes, the consciousness and atmosphere, the symbolism and organization of those whose activities he studies. But he cannot leave his task there. He must transmit what he has learned in a language understood by the public which sponsors his work, or which at least “receives” it—and that particular public is, first and foremost, his academic colleagues, those within his own profession. If the language of that public is less than hermetically sealed—and this is in the nature of such languages—then he must take such measures as he can to sterilize his terms as he goes along, thereby reducing the prospect of cultural infection of his material. We do not live in a world of pure concepts, and even the frictionless pistons and perfect lubricants of thermodynamics are no more than convenient fictions.

In the use of ideal-type constructs, sociologists (including the sociologists of religion) adopt similar devices, even though the

sterilization of sociological concepts is more difficult and more delicate. The sociologist's defense, however, in this matter, as in so many others that touch fundamentally on the notion of the enterprise in which he is engaged, is continued awareness of the difficulties inherent in his own activities and his own analysis. This is implied in his professionalism. On the one hand he must interpret his material to his professional colleagues, and on the other he must maintain faith with those whose religious concerns have been the object of his enquiry. The balance of these two preoccupations clearly varies, both between pieces of work and, whenever fieldwork is involved, within the same particular piece of research. If I give the last word to the problem of fieldwork, that perhaps reflects something of the balance of my own contemporary concerns.

For his religious public, the professional sociologist of religion is something of a curiosity. Here is a man seen to be deeply interested in religion and (one may hope) seen to be widely informed about it. And yet he is not, and quite deliberately not, a religiously-committed man—at least, whilst practising his sociology. The religious people with whom he works know that his values are not their values. And yet, he clearly knows a great deal about the religion he is studying. Sometimes respondents say, as they have said to me, “You know a lot about us; you know about the truth: why do you not join us?” It is a difficult—a fundamental—question: but it is an understandable question and a perfectly proper question. The sociologist cannot say, “I know what you think is the truth, but I do not accept it.” Indeed, it would be professionally wrong to discuss what one accepted or rejected as “the truth.” The respondents know that one is not committed to their perspective. They ask because they have a genuine concern for another human being—and if they are concerned, this is an indication that they perceive the sympathy which a sociologist of religion must feel for his respondents. To be asked is to be paid a compliment. But it is also a dilemma. The best answer that I can give to such a question is to say, as I have said

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on occasions, "You must regard me as a photographer. Since I am taking pictures of what I find, I cannot be in the picture myself." It is not a perfect reply, and it does not solve the serious implications of the question, but it maintains the investigator's detachment and the integrity of the professional nature of his commitment; it sustains the necessary sympathetic relationship of investigator and respondent; and it provides some analogous justification for the meeting point of their different sets of values.

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