

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

A Modest Social Constructionist View

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The following is an essay prepared in anticipation of a keynote address at the annual conference of the Japanese Association for Religious Studies (JARS) to be held at Soka University in September 2015. A Japanese translation is also available in this year's Nanzan Institute Japanese-language Bulletin (Shohō 所報).

This paper has two main objectives. The first is to characterise my particular way of raising sociological questions about religion. The second objective is to explain how my sociological research can make a contribution to broader studies of religion. The reason for giving so much attention to my own ideas and publications is to give Japanese scholars an opportunity to consider the extent to which their own work is either aligned with my approach or incompatible with it. In this sense, my intention is to facilitate a debate and an exchange of ideas about the contributions that at least one kind of sociology can make to the understanding of religion.

Let me quickly add an apology for focusing so much of this paper on my own research. The reason for choosing such a narrow focus is not that my work is any kind of model for others to follow. On the contrary, I would like to invite readers to react critically to my ideas so that a debate can take place. I am offering my work as focus for discussion and as a “target” for criticism in the hope that this will help to make debate easier than it would be if the focus was on the sociology of religion in general.

Sociological approaches to the study of “religion”

Two of my publications contain statements of my general approach to studying religion from a sociological point of view. One is the introductory section of my book *Social Theory and Religion* (BECKFORD 2003); the other is an autobiographical account of my career that appeared in an edited volume on *Studying*

Religion in Society (BECKFORD 2013a). Incidentally, other chapters in the latter volume are relevant to this paper because they illustrate some of the variety of approaches that sociologists in Western countries take to the study of religion.¹

In their different ways, all these different approaches take the social dimensions of religion as their object of study. But what does this mean? Among other things, it means that religion can be understood, in part, as an aspect of the social life of many—but not all—human societies. In other words, religion can be studied as a feature of such basic social *processes* as socialisation, interaction, communication, organisation, regulation, and so on. Sociological studies also examine religion in relation to *factors* that shape the life-course and life chances such as social class and status, ethnicity, nationality, gender, political and moral values, age, and generation. Another important area for sociological studies of religion is the social *patterning* of worship and beliefs, religious organisations, religious professional roles, and the involvement of religious groups in social welfare, civic activities and social movement campaigns. Most famously, perhaps, the topic of religion features in theories about high-level processes of *social change* such as industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalisation, secularisation, globalisation, and so on. But perhaps the most ambitious project of some sociologists of religion has been to devise *theories* of religion which give sociological reasons for the very phenomenon of religion (STARK and BAINBRIDGE 1987; BENTHALL 2008; RIESEBRODT 2010; PACE 2011). Finally, it needs to be emphasised that exploration of all these aspects of religion as a social phenomenon is likely to be most successful when it is conducted with sensitivity to historical, geographical and cultural contexts.

At the same time, a rich diversity of *research methods* can be employed to gather and analyse information about the social aspects of religion. They include, for example, surveys of beliefs and opinions, analysis of demographic trends and official statistics, interviews, ethnography, participant observation, focus groups, analysis of social, broadcast and print media, discourse analysis, and interpretation of visual images.

A social constructionist approach

I characterise my approach to studying religion sociologically as “modest” social constructionism (BECKFORD 2003, 3). Let me try to be clear about my use of the term “social constructionism,” which is commonly used by social scientists and students of culture, albeit in widely differing ways (VELODY and WILLIAMS 1998). In the most radical sense of the term, social constructionism holds that

1. For mainly Western overviews of the scope of the sociology of religion, see DILLON 2003; BECKFORD and DEMERATH 2007; and CLARKE 2009.

social reality consists of nothing but text and discourse. This is the “universal” form of constructionism that the philosopher John SEARLE (1995) dismisses for good reason. According to this radical view, there can be nothing more real or accessible than language use and discursive practice (GERGEN 1999). Against this radical view, my more modest use of “constructionism” means only that human beings construct, communicate, and negotiate shared meanings in the course of their social interactions with each other. For example, public order, disorder, panics, and confidence all emerge as the products of countless human interactions. Similarly, my main interest is in the social processes whereby the meaning of “religion” is continuously being intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast, and so on, in social contexts.

Let me add that I am far from being alone in thinking of the category of religion as a social construction. To take just one example, Peter BEYER (2003, 158) argues that scientific, theological and “official” conceptions of religion vary with “the social structures in which they take place.” His approach is rooted in the sociology of knowledge which, in turn, can trace its origins back through the work of Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger to that of the phenomenological philosophy of Alfred Schutz.

The meaning that I give to “social construction” is not rooted in any particular assumptions about ontology (“what there is”) or epistemology (“what can be known”). It is merely part of an analytical strategy that I use for investigating aspects of religion from a sociological point of view. Indirectly, my strategy also asks how the category of “non-religion” is socially constructed. There is no assumption on my part that the category of either religion or non-religion is any more natural, given or unproblematic than the other. In fact the shifting boundary between the categories of religion and non-religion in various types of discourse is particularly interesting to me. I want to know how the boundary is staked out, defended, deployed, attacked, concealed, blurred, re-defined or even dissolved.

It should become clear that my choice of the word “construction” does not necessarily imply “invention” in the sense in which Jason Ānanda JOSEPHSON’s (2012) book accounts for *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. His inquiry into the history of Japanese attempts in the mid-nineteenth century to find a term that adequately covered Japanese traditions as well as Christianity and Buddhism stresses the need to find a new term for a completely new set of phenomena. But what I have in mind are the less dramatic processes whereby the ostensibly well-known and widely understood phenomenon of religion in western societies nevertheless remains the object of frequent contention about definition, meaning and interpretation. This is what I mean by “construction.” It signifies a process of putting components together. This is different from discovering, manufacturing (MCCUTCHEON 1997), imagining (SMITH 1982) or inventing

(PETERSON and WALHOF 2003; MASUZAWA 2005) religion. It brings connotations of “fashioning,” “shaping,” and “patterning.” There is also the important implication that these constructions can be deconstructed or reconstructed. My involvement in sociological research has no interest in trying to determine the essence—or a definitive definition—of religion.

My modest social constructionist approach makes no assumptions about the reality or otherwise of the transcendent, the sacred, the divine, the infinite, the “finally final,” or ultimate reality. I accept that some human beings have experiences of communicating with the transcendent. I also accept that these experiences may be the inspiration for love, charity, selflessness, sublime artistic achievements, virtue, feelings of awe and so on. But at the same time it is also clear to me that these experiences and the benefits imputed to them are symbolized and conveyed in social and cultural forms which display patterns. These patterns are shaped by all manner of influences that arise from such sources as faith traditions, high culture, popular culture, ideologies, and political events. And, in turn, these expressions of experiences with the transcendent are capable of exercising their own influence on social and cultural life. All of these processes are eminently social and therefore of interest to the sociology of religion—whatever else they may be.

Another key characteristic of my modest social constructionism is its deliberately partial and one-sided perspective on religion. It seeks primarily to throw light on the uses that can be made of religion in various social contexts—and on the controversies and conflicts that arise. Questions about the recognition and regulation of what counts as religion are also on the social constructionist agenda, as I shall show in the next section of this paper. But my approach makes no claim to replace, or even to enhance, other conceptions of religion. It merely offers a distinctive conceptual angle from which to understand the wide diversity of ways in which constructions of religion are employed in social and cultural life.

The last point that I want to make about the continuing saga of attempts to produce a universally effective and acceptable definition of religion is that a form of “metaphysical pathos” (GOULDNER 1955) seems to haunt them. It is as if there is something unique—and uniquely troubling—about the difficulty of conceptualising or defining religion. But in my view religion is no different in this respect from other categories such as education, culture, art and sport. None of these institutions enjoys a universally satisfactory or agreed definition. These categories are all “contested” in social life as well as in scholarly discussion. It is a mistake, therefore, to think that our scholarship must be defective if we cannot resolve definitional problems about religion once and for all.

Social constructionism in relation to new religious movements and religion in prisons

This section of the paper provides some examples from two of my areas of research in which social constructionist ideas have played an important role.

(a) The first example is about new religious movements. At the time of my first visit to Japan in 1978 I was actively engaged in research on new religious movements (NRMS), and I maintain my interest in them mainly through involvement in the work of Inform—a research centre and network created in 1988 by Professor Eileen Barker for the purpose of collecting, assessing and disseminating objective information about NRMS and minority religions.²

A recurring aspect of my work on NRMS has been the portrayal of them in the mass media—and the uses that the opponents of NRMS have made of these portrayals (BECKFORD and COLE 1988; BECKFORD 1995). The focus of my analysis was partly on the social processes through which notions such as “cult,” “destructive cult,” and “brainwashing” were not only constructed but also amplified and transmitted across different social groups and networks in various countries (BECKFORD 1983b). But this also entailed investigation of the “anti-cult” groups which used popular, stereotyped portrayals of NRMS in their campaigns to denigrate the movements and to invoke legal and political regulation of them. In short, it was the social construction of what I called “cult controversies” which lay at the centre of my research in the 1970s and 1980s (BECKFORD 1985).

In addition, I have repeatedly looked for ways of making comparisons between different countries in terms of their attempts to “frame” and control these controversies (BECKFORD 1983b, 1993, 1998a). The case of “cult controversies” in France has long held a particularly strong interest for me, especially because this staunchly secular Republic has invested so many resources in official programmes and laws to control what it calls “*les dérives sectaires*” (cultic aberrations) (BECKFORD 2004). More recently, I tried to identify the sociological features of religious controversies in more general terms but again with the emphasis on their socially constructed character (BECKFORD and MARMUSZTEJN 2010).

In short, the focus of my approach to understanding NRMS has mainly been on the controversies that surround them. At the heart of these controversies are struggles over the power to frame the movements as harmful in various ways, to construct them as social problems, and to impose controls on their activities.

² See <http://www.inform.ac/> See also the Ashgate/Inform series of edited books on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements: http://www.ashgatepublishing.com/default.aspx?page=5097&series_id=533&calcTitle=1.

In turn, the movements mobilise campaigns of resistance which seek to challenge their controversial image and to claim protection under treaties and laws that guarantee the freedom of religion—and the equality of religions in some countries. The power to enforce definitions and interpretive frames is under the spotlight of my kind of social constructionism.

In addition, I have employed a social constructionist approach to studies of individual members—and ex-members—of religious movements. This involved analysing the accounts that these individuals gave of their conversion and/or de-conversion. Using insights from ethnomethodology, I tried to identify the distinctiveness of the “conversion accounts” given by British converts to the Watch Tower movement of Jehovah’s Witnesses (BECKFORD 1975, 1978a) and of the de-conversion accounts given by former members of the Unificationist movement (BECKFORD 1978b, 1983a). Both cases involved the social construction of accounts that were “rational” in the sense of offering explanations that were intended to be considered competent and plausible by the people at whom the accounts were aimed. Equally, the accounts that opponents and critics gave of conversion to, and de-conversion from, these two religious movements in terms of, for example, brainwashing, mind control and de-programming were artfully constructed to display their own rationality (BECKFORD 1985, 190–217).

(b) The second example of social constructionism in my work concerns religion in prisons. In fact, the focus of most of my research since 1994 has been on the provision of religious and spiritual care to prisoners in countries such as England & Wales, France and Canada (BECKFORD and GILLIAT 1998; BECKFORD, JOLY and KHOSROKHAVAR 2005; BECKFORD 2013b; BECKFORD and CAIRNS 2015).

From my point of view, the category of religion is not simply a philosophical abstraction. It undoubtedly *can be* an abstraction; but in the eyes of a sociologist it also amounts to an empirically observable feature of many social settings. And nowhere are the implications of religion, as a category, more visible than in prisons and other institutions housing people who are removed to varying degrees from the rest of society. Residential schools, hospitals (GILLIAT 2001; CADGE 2012; GILLIAT, ALI, and PATTISON 2013) and military establishments (GUTKOWSKI and WILKES 2011; HANSEN 2012) are also among the other social settings where religion is “made visible” and recognised as such in the terms set by each institution. In other words, what counts as religion, both in general and in particular, is a social construction which arises in part from a wide range of processes as diverse as legislation, litigation, accommodation and concession. These processes contribute towards the reification of religion.

Prisons are prime sites of reified knowledge about religion (BECKFORD 2012). By this, I mean that prisons are places where the abstract category of religion is translated into specific things which are either permitted or prohibited depending on whether they conform to an official model of “real” religion. For example,

the Prison Service of England & Wales³ determines that prisoners who identify themselves as practitioners of Pagan traditions are to be regarded as having a religion and are permitted to keep the following artefacts in their cell:

- Incense and holder (Lavender and Frankincense are most common)
- A religious piece of jewellery (e.g. pentagram necklace or ring)
- Hoodless Robe (only to be used during private or corporate worship)
- Flexible twig for wand
- Rune stones (wood, stone or clay tablets with the symbols of the Norse-German alphabet) and bag or box to carry them
- Chalice (cup)

In addition,

Some Pagans use Tarot Cards for meditation and guidance. This may be allowed under the supervision of the Pagan Chaplain. If a prisoner requests to be allowed to retain a part or full pack in possession, this may be allowed, but only following a local Risk Assessment to determine whether there is any reason to preclude cards being kept in possession. The cards are for personal use only and may be withdrawn if used inappropriately (e.g. telling fortunes).

(MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2011, 73)

It is important to note how the intervention of a chaplain and, in some circumstances, the conduct of a risk assessment are required before Tarot Cards can be used legitimately. The permissibility of this particular practice has to be negotiated—and may be denied. This example is nothing more than a trivial indication of the extent to which aspects of religion are reified as either permitted or prohibited practices and objects in the setting of prisons in England & Wales. This means that prison authorities—usually in consultation with chaplains and leading representatives of “faith traditions”—select and apply their own indicators of what is considered normal in the practice of any particular religion. I think of this as a “recipe” for each religion. And the combined “book” of recipes for all permitted religions is the Prison Service Instruction number 51 “Faith and pastoral care for prisoners” (MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2011).

In “total institutions” such as prisons, there is pressure to define and regulate virtually all activities. And activities categorised as religious are no exception. This is why the reification of religion takes such elaborate and finely grained forms. Nothing can be left to chance; ambiguities are kept to a minimum; and

3. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-service>. England and Wales, two of the four components of the United Kingdom, share the same prison service, but Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate prison systems.

procedures are in place for monitoring compliance with the permitted formats for religious activities. Some prisoners test the limits of permitted religious activities—with or without the support of interest groups outside prison. At the same time, the very existence of detailed “recipes” for the practice of faith traditions gives rise to negotiation and contention about comparisons and analogies between them.

In short, my social constructionist approach has shown that prisons in England and Wales translate the general category of religion into objective statements about the components of the particular religions that prisoners are permitted to practice. The “recipes” for the practice of each religion are social constructions which reify religious traditions in terms of various patterns: ministry, corporate worship, private worship, festivals, beliefs, theology, diet, dress, toiletries, work, artefacts, marriage, funerals and groupings within the tradition. These recipes are also authoritative in so far as they are the products of negotiations between Prison Service officials and appointed members of the national Chaplaincy Council and its associated list of Faith Advisers. The Faith Advisers, who are representatives of selected faith traditions, have become touchstones for the authenticity of the religious practices permitted to prisoners, although they cannot possibly represent all the different strands, movements or tendencies within their own faith traditions. Nevertheless, the authority that they exercise also contributes towards the reification of religion because they accept the reduction of their diverse faith traditions to the dimensions of supposedly core obligations or requirements.

These recipes produce real effects in the lives of prisoners and prison staff alike. Most notably, recipes for religions shape the ways in which prisons are built (to include chapels or multi-faith spaces for worship), staff are employed (as chaplains), volunteers are engaged (to assist chaplains), training is delivered (to sensitise staff to patterns of religious obligations), time is allocated (for religious programming and religious festivals), diets are accommodated (to suit religious requirements), arrangements can be made (in the event of serious illness or death among prisoners and/or their close relatives), and resources are distributed (in support of religious practices).

Recipes for the practice of religions that are permitted in prisons are social constructions—but so what? How can that be of any interest? My answer is in two parts. The first is that prisons in England and Wales, as public institutions, are governed not only by the Prison Act 1952 and other secondary legislation but also by the Equality Act 2010. This means that it is illegal to discriminate against prisoners (or other citizens) on the grounds of nine “protected characteristics,” one of which is “religion or belief.” Not surprisingly, some of the disputes that arise in prisons centre on claims that certain religions or religious practices are unfairly discriminated against. These claims have multiplied as the

religious diversity of the prison population has increased (BECKFORD 2013b). The question of how “religion or belief” is interpreted and implemented in the everyday life of prisons is at the heart of claims to equality and grievances about inequality. A social constructionist approach is indispensable, therefore, to any investigation of how disputes about religion arise in prisons and how these disputes are managed.

The second part of my answer is that some prisoners try to take advantage of their circumstances; and some of them are litigious. So, if religious activity enjoys protection and privilege, why not try to create or adapt a religion in order to take advantage? The best known case is that of the Church of the New Song (CONS⁴), a prison gang that spread through federal and state penitentiaries in the US beginning in the 1970s. It had some elaborate beliefs and practices, including the “religious obligation” to hold a weekly “celebration of life” banquet including sherry wine and beefsteak. It took a succession of American courts thirty years finally to put a stop to CONS, albeit on the technical grounds of inconsistencies in the so-called church’s teachings. Questions about how religion is constructed lie at the heart of this case—and are implicitly questions about who has the power to enforce their constructions in particular circumstances. The link between social constructionism and power in the context of religion has a long history (BECKFORD 1983c).

Furthermore, comparisons between the prison systems of different countries are of special interest to me because they reveal not only variations in how religion can be constructed but also the different forms that its “management” in prisons can take (BECCI 2011; FURSETH and KÜHLE 2011; BECCI and KNOBEL 2013). In the space available here I can only sketch some of the findings from my own comparative studies of religion in the prison systems of England & Wales and France (BECKFORD and GILLIAT 1998; BECKFORD, JOLY and KHOSROKHAVAR 2005). The emphasis is on the different frameworks that regulate the recognition of permissible religion—another aspect of social construction.

(i) England and Wales

The Prison Act 1952 requires all prisons to have a chaplain from the Church of England and such other ministers of religion as the Secretary of State may consider necessary. Governors are legally required to record the “religious denomination” of all prisoners at the point of reception and to inform the relevant chaplain. Other regulations specify that the Prison Service “recognises and respects the right of prisoners to register and practise their faith whilst in custody” (MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2011, 1). This is recognition of individual prisoners’ rights, although much of the regulatory framework is actually concerned

4. This acronym is an ironic pun on the English language abbreviation for the word “convicts.”

with the collective activities of religious groups, chaplains and representatives of selected faith traditions. In fact, the framework is principally about “religious provision” or the corporate responsibility for facilitating the personal and collective practice of religions. This explains why the “Performance Standard 51. Religion”—by which the quality of each prison’s arrangements for religion is regularly assessed—stipulates that all establishments should “enable prisoners to participate in corporate worship and other religious activities that encourage their spiritual and personal development whilst in custody, and in preparation for release into the community” (MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2006). The “required outcomes” relate to such things as the appointment of chaplains, the accurate conduct of “religious registration,” opportunities for corporate worship and the provision of pastoral care. The emphasis is heavily on the official requirement to make these provisions rather than on the rights and freedoms of individual prisoners simply to practice their faith. In this way, religion is constructed, in part, as a collective property of prison establishments and their regimes in England and Wales.

Another aspect of the social construction of religion in the prisons of England and Wales can be seen in the policy and practice of selecting only certain religious traditions for inclusion in the list of “faith specific provision.” This selectivity also applies to the range of religious traditions from which chaplains may be appointed on the advice of the Prison Service Chaplaincy’s panel of Faith Advisers. In 2013, the traditions of Quakerism and Rastafari were added to the list, but Scientology and the Nation of Islam remain excluded. Moreover, chaplains are expected to “work as an inclusive team and meet together on a regular basis” (MINISTRY OF JUSTICE 2011, 5), thereby reinforcing the impression that the provision of religious and pastoral care in the prisons of England & Wales is less to do with the individual rights of prisoners than it is to do with the integration of approved religious practices and personnel into the corporate life of prisons.

(ii) France

The French Prison Service, *l’Administration pénitentiaire*, is bound by the constitutional stipulation that France should be a unitary and secular (*laïc*) Republic that is separate from, and neutral towards, all religions. The 2009 law on prisons also specifies that “inmates have the right to freedom of opinion, conscience and religion. They can practice the religion of their choice in accordance with the conditions prevailing in their establishment, without any restrictions other than those imposed by the security and good order of the establishment.”⁵ In

5. Loi n° 2009-1436 du 24 novembre 2009 pénitentiaire: 1.

addition, the consolidated *Code de procédure pénale* of June 2011⁶ guarantees to inmates various other rights, for example, to confidential correspondence with chaplains and the opportunity for meetings with them on request “as often as necessary” (Article R57-9-6).

However, the first point to make is that these rights are interpreted as applicable mainly to what individual prisoners are permitted to do and to keep in the privacy of their cells. For example, it is permissible for prisoners to wear conspicuous symbols of their religious identity in their cells but not in the public areas of prisons. Religious clothing, sacred texts and religious artefacts must be placed in a bag if they are to be carried between cells and worship spaces. But prisoners’ rights to collective worship are not always honored—except for the services provided, often by local priests and volunteers (one third of whom are women), for the benefit of Catholics. The relative privileges enjoyed by Catholic prisoners are often justified on the grounds that they represent tradition or culture rather than religion; and this supposedly helps to avoid breaching the principle of *laïcité*. Jean Baubérot’s (2008) term for this is “*catho-laïcité*.” In itself, this is an interesting example of a discourse that constructs religion as something essentially private that also happens to be part of “traditional” French culture.

Second, and as a consequence of *laïcité*’s insistence that the French Republic cannot officially take religious or ethnic identity into account, there is no procedure for recording the religious identity of prisoners. There are no official statistics relating to religion in prisons or in any other institutions of the Republic. This means that religion is reified mainly as something that individuals should be free to cultivate in private if they wish (within the limits of the law). The responsibility of French prisons is principally to ensure that this individual right is not unfairly obstructed. Although the law also specifies that every prisoner should be able to participate in collective worship under the supervision of chaplaincy staff, responsibility for this is effectively devolved to a relatively small number of chaplains and a much larger number of volunteers from religious organizations, with a minimum of official co-ordination at regional and national levels of the prison system. Nevertheless, *laïcité* has “variable geometry” (BÉRAUD, GALEMBERT, and ROSTAING 2013) and can therefore be moulded to different shapes in different settings. In Véronique ALTGLAS’s (2010) words “*laïcité* is what *laïcité* does”—and it apparently operates differently in state schools, hospitals, prisons and the armed services.

A third aspect of the way in which religion is socially constructed in French prisons is the suspicion that religion, except in the confines of the private sphere, may represent a threat of “communitarianism.” Collective expressions of strong

6. See <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCode.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006071154&dateTexte=20110624>. Last accessed 25 February 2015.

religious identity are suspected of having the dangerous capacity to short-circuit the unmediated relationship between citizens and the State by creating an alternative focus for political identity and loyalty. As such, communitarian forms of religion allegedly pose a threat to security and good order in prisons and elsewhere. This suspicious attitude towards forms of religion that have communal dimensions, especially those with explicitly political implications, is congruent with the French Republic's long-running campaigns of opposition towards controversial religious movements (BECKFORD 2004; PALMER 2008, 2011). Not surprisingly, the combination of communalism, controversial religious movements and prisons evokes particularly harsh responses. For example, the *Administration pénitentiaire* has repeatedly refused to allow Jehovah's Witnesses to visit prisons for religious purposes—in spite of the fact that more than a dozen courts, including the Administrative Appeal Court of Paris in June 2011⁷ and the Conseil d'État on 16 October 2013,⁸ have penalised various public authorities for their failure to recognise that Witnesses should be permitted to enter prisons as chaplains. To summarise these comparisons, then, the prisons of England and Wales tend to construct religion as a legally required aspect of their corporate life. Full-time, part-time and volunteer chaplains are an integral part of this system, and there is formal commitment to the principle that permissible religions and beliefs enjoy equality. Grievances centre on allegations that some religions are excluded from prisons and that the principle of equality for all religions or beliefs is not always respected in practice. In comparison, French prisons tend to construct religion as a private matter for individual prisoners. The provision of resources for collective religious activities, including the employment of chaplains, remains uneven and weak; and chaplains play a very small role in the corporate life of prisons. Ironically, however, the differences between the prisons of England and Wales and France in relation to their respective ways of constructing and regulating religion have no clear implications for combating the so-called radicalisation of Muslim prisoners. There is widespread concern in the UK as well as in France about links between imprisonment and the socialisation of Muslim prisoners into violent, Islamist extremism. Yet, neither the provision of many carefully trained and selected Muslim chaplains in the prisons of England & Wales nor the French strategy of regarding the practice of Islam as mainly a matter for individuals or voluntary groups seems to be entirely successful. Prison authorities in both jurisdictions are struggling to respond adequately to their disproportionately large and growing populations of Muslim inmates, including those

7. See <http://www.lextimes.fr/4.aspx?sr=5063> Last accessed 2 March 2015.

8. See <http://www.conseil-etat.fr/Decisions-Avis-Publications/Decisions/Selection-des-decisions-faisant-l-objet-d-une-communication-particuliere/CE-16-octobre-2013-Garde-des-Sceaux-ministre-de-la-justice-et-des-libertes-c-m.-n-et-autres>. Last accessed 2 March 2015.

with sympathies for violent extremism.⁹ The policy discourses about the appropriate way for public authorities such as prison services to respond to the threats posed by “violent Islamism” are ripe for analysis in social constructionist terms. Indeed, I argued long ago that British and French debates about social solidarity in the 1980s and 1990s lent themselves to an examination of “the ideological battles for control over what is to count as social solidarity” and, in particular, of “the place of religion as an ideological resource in those battles” (BECKFORD 1998b, 154). Similar battles rage today about what counts as “social cohesion,” “pluralism” (BECKFORD 2014) and a “multi-faith society.”

Conclusion

Sociological studies of religion can be based on a wide variety of theoretical ideas, but this paper has deliberately highlighted only research conducted from a modest social constructionist position. And, although critics have tried to dismiss social constructionism as a post-modern perversion of truth or as an expression of insidious relativism, I believe that it forms an indispensable part of the sociological toolkit. This is why my aim in this paper has been to show how a social constructionist perspective can help—sometimes in conjunction with other perspectives—to reveal the processes whereby the meanings attributed to “religion” are negotiated in the course of social interaction. I have drawn examples from my own work to show how these processes of negotiation take place at the level of individual “conversion accounts,” mass media portrayals of controversial religious movements, and discourses deployed in policy documents, regulations and daily regimes in prison systems.

“Negotiation” is a rather anaemic term, but I want to stress that it includes not only positive interactions but also heated contestations and rejections of socially constructed meanings. It is a process which plays out continuously in contexts as diverse as courts of law, public policy discussions, debates about Religious Education syllabuses, political polemics about “faith-based” welfare programs, foreign policy doctrines in relation to religious freedom, and proposals for improving “religious literacy.” In all of these areas, the social construction of religion is at work. I believe that my attempts to understand it can make some

9. Muslims in the UK amounted to roughly five per cent of the total population at the time of the last national Census in 2011 but as many as fourteen per cent of the prison population of England and Wales in June 2014, according to the Offender Management Caseload Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2014>. Population quarterly: Q3 2014. Table 1.5. Last accessed 25 February 2015. The French prison service publishes no official statistics about the religious or ethnic identification of prisoners. For estimates based on ethnographic research, see KHOSROKHAVAR 2015.

necessary—albeit not sufficient—contributions to the wider enterprise of the sociology of religion and to Religious Studies.

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