

Networks and Religion

Social scientists who study religion generally believe that social networks play a central role in religious life. However, most studies draw on measures that are relatively poor proxies for capturing the effects of social networks. This book illustrates how researchers can draw on formal social network analysis methods to explore the interplay of networks and religion. The book's introductory chapters provide overviews of the social scientific study of religion and social network analysis. The remaining chapters explore a variety of topics current in the social scientific study of religion, as well as introduce a variety of social network theories and methods, such as balance theory, ego network analysis, exponential random graph models, and stochastic actor-oriented models. By embedding social network analysis within a social scientific study of religion framework, *Networks and Religion* offers an array of approaches for studying the role that social networks play in religious belief and practice.

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Networks and Religion

*Ties That Bind, Loose, Build Up, and Tear
Down*

SEAN F. EVERTON

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To Deanne, Tara, and Brendan

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Preface

This is a book about networks and religion.^{1, 2} Social scientists who study religion generally agree that social networks play a central role in religious life (Everton 2015b).³ We are reasonably confident, for instance, that social ties not only facilitate the recruitment of individuals to faith communities (Lofland and Stark 1965; Sageman 2004; Smilde 2005; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1980a; Stark and Wang 2015; Vala and O'Brien 2007) but also pressure people to conform to the community's accepted norms and behavior (Adamczyk and Felson 2006; Bott 1957; Coleman 1990; Finke and Stark 2005; Granovetter 1992, 2005), sometimes leading marginal church members to participate even when they have little or no desire to do so (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, 1999). It also appears that people with ties to a religious group's core are far less likely to leave than are those without such ties (Popielarz and McPherson 1995; Stark and Bainbridge 1980a). Social networks also play a role in diffusing religious ideas and practices with the wider world (Chaves 1996; Collar 2013a, 2013b; Kim and Pfaff 2012), as well as leading people to volunteer, vote, become politically active, and donate their time and money to both secular and religious charities (Beyerlein and Chaves 2003; Beyerlein and Sikkink 2008; Greeley 1997b; Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam 2013; McClure 2015; Merino 2013; Schwadel et al. 2015). Congregational networks also play a key role in the health and happiness of their members. In particular, there is a positive association between religion and physical and mental health, and many social scientists believe that much of this is attributable to the networks in which people of faith are embedded (Brashears 2010; Ellison and George 1994; Lim and Putnam 2010; Smith 2003d; Smith and Denton 2005). Finally, some social network patterns are more likely to give rise to conflict and

¹ Portions of this and the following section previously appeared in Everton (2015b).

² The views expressed in this book are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the US government.

³ In this book, I adopt a substantive definition of "religion." See Appendix B.

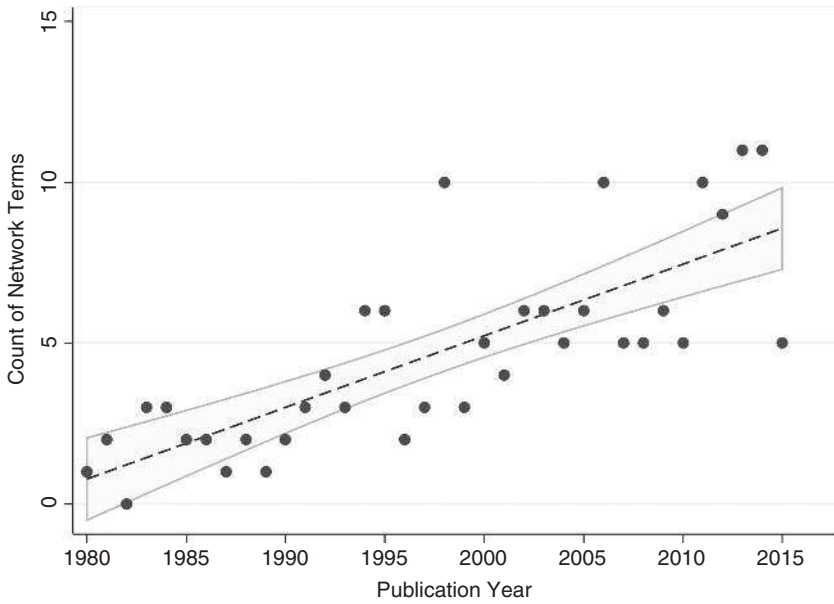


Figure P.1 Count of articles using network-related terms by year

violence than are others. Available evidence suggests that not only can very dense religious networks lead to internal conflict (Zablocki 1980), but they can also be a primary cause lying behind radicalization and violence (della Porta 2013; Everton 2016; Hafez 2003, 2004; Hall 1987, 1995; Sageman 2004; Tabor and Gallagher 1995; Wright 1995).

The appeal to social networks as a mechanism for explaining religious belief and behavior has steadily increased over the past few decades as well. This increase is captured in Figure P.1, which presents a count of the number of articles that include terms related to networks in either their titles or abstracts.⁴ Unfortunately, most of these studies have drawn on measures that are relatively poor proxies for capturing network effects (Everton 2015b). In particular, they often infer ties from surveys that ask questions such as: “How often do you see, write, or talk on the telephone with your friends?” “How many close friends do you have in this congregation?” “Tell me if you agree with the following statement: My congregation feels/felt like family to me.” “To what extent did you talk to people in your religious congregation?” and so on. Questions such

⁴ For these counts, only articles from the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, and *Sociology of Religion* were included. These were chosen because historically they have been the primary journals for publishing articles concerned with the social scientific study of religion.

as these cannot fully capture the social context in which religious beliefs and practices are embedded. As Cheadle and Schwadel (2012:1198) note, “[M]ost quantitative research on American religion is now based on surveys of unconnected individuals, with the result that the social context of religion is obscured.” This is not to suggest that this is the desired state of affairs of social scientists who study religion. Indeed, it almost certainly is not, but their hands are “tied by design and method” (Cheadle and Schwadel 2012:1199). That is why one of the primary motivations behind this book is to introduce formal social network methods (and data) to social scientists who want to more fully explore the interplay of networks and religion but are unfamiliar with the tools and methods for doing so.

Social Network Analysis and the Study of Religion

Curiously, those most qualified to study networks and religion, namely social network analysts, have shown little interest in doing so. This may reflect an assumption that religious belief and practice is becoming increasingly rare – an assumption that, we will see in Chapter 1, has very little empirical support. Or, it could reflect, as Christian Smith (2010) argues, an anti-religious bias among network theorists. In one of the more impressive rants to ever appear in a footnote, at least in terms of its length and breadth, Smith (2010:273–276) notes that theology, religion, and faith repeatedly appear in the writings of network theorists but seldom in a positive way; instead, they use religion as a straw man against which they pit their own theoretical musings. For example, Bruce Mayhew and Stephan Fuchs draw analogies between religious faith and what they disparagingly call essentialist sociology: “The essentialist . . . is locked into a view of reality that has the character of religious conviction” (Mayhew 1981:633); “Unlike religions, science is forward looking, not backward. A science cares for itself, not some social cause” (Fuchs 2001:7). Similarly, Donald Black writes, “The value of science has been amply demonstrated during the past several centuries. What are its competitors? Religion? Metaphysics? Folklore?” (Black 2002:105). And Harrison White traces social science’s obsession with the individual to Christian theology:

Most present social science theories can be seen as exegesis on Enlightenment myths. These in turn took their presuppositions from Christian theology. Thus, the Enlightenment was formed by, even as it fought against, a theology of the soul, and the social sciences as its progeny remain enmeshed in the same presuppositions.

(White 1992:23–24)

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After noting that these critiques are theologically and historically uninformed,⁵ Smith (2010:276) speculates that network structuralists are hostile to things religious because Christianity and the social sciences have been rivals in the realm of higher education. There was a time when mainline and evangelical Christianity “held controlling positions of higher education, early science, publishing, and reform movements,” but they have since been supplanted by more secular actors:

Psychology displaced pastoral counseling, anthropology displaced missionaries, social work displaced the social gospel, and sociology displaced theological ethics and moral reform movements. That experience resulted in the construction over the twentieth century of American colleges and universities as havens of secularity in a broader society still largely “awash in a sea of faith” . . . It also established the social sciences . . . as the structural and therefore symbolic rivals of religion. In which case, discursive work aimed at strengthening the superior authority of social science . . . will naturally underscore the contrast between its scientific and reliable knowledge and the superstitions and errors of religious faith.

(Smith 2010:276)

Regardless of whether Smith’s characterization of network structuralism is accurate, network analysts do appear to have little or no interest in exploring the interplay of networks and religion. A review of presentations at Sunbelt, the annual meeting of the International Network of Social Network Analysis, from 2001 to 2014, found that in less than 1 percent of the papers presented did the term “religion” or one associated with religion (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Jew, Muslim, spiritual, scripture, clergy) appear in the title or abstract. Moreover, very few articles concerning religion have appeared in the pages of the three primary social network journals – *Social Networks*, *Connections*, or the *Journal of Social Structure* – and the *SAGE Handbook on Social Network Analysis* (Scott and Carrington 2011) includes no chapters on networks and religion. In fact, religion is not even mentioned in the index.⁶ Because it is unlikely

⁵ For instance, Smith notes that the notion of the soul, which some network analysts equate with atomistic human action, derives from Greek philosophy and not Judaism or Christianity. He also points out that Christian orthodoxy’s relational ontology (i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity) is such that “if network structuralism were to find an isomorphic counterpart in any religious worldview, then Christianity should be a naturally prime candidate” (Smith 2010:275).

⁶ Sociologists of religion often treat social networks as an afterthought as well. A review of five leading introductory texts to the sociology of religion (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016; Davie 2013; Emerson, Mirola, and Monahan 2011; McGuire 2002; Roberts and Yamane 2012) turned up no mention of social networks in the table of contents or the indexes. As we will see, however, many sociologists of religion have a profound interest in the interplay of networks and religion.

that all social network analysts are uninterested in the role that social networks play in religious belief and practice, another motivating factor for this book is to introduce the social scientific study of religion to those interested in studying networks and religion, as well as provide an overview of some of the latest scholarship on the topic. Each of the substantive chapters also extend previous research with new analyses.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized topically. The first two chapters serve as an introduction. Chapter 1 introduces readers to the social scientific study of religion, while Chapter 2 provides an overview of social network analysis (SNA). Readers familiar with either one (or both) may want to skip ahead to the more substantive chapters. My sense is that most readers will be familiar with either one or the other but not both. The next eight chapters provide substantive looks at many of the ways in which social networks and religion interact. They are broken down into four sections (two chapters each) corresponding to the book's subtitle. The first two chapters consider the ways in which social networks bind people to faith communities, both in terms of recruitment (Chapter 3) and of commitment (Chapter 4). We will see that social ties not only draw people into faith communities but also play a key role in keeping them from leaving. Chapter 3 also takes time to introduce readers to some of statistical models developed specifically for social network data. Chapters 5 and 6 examine various ways in which social networks help diffuse religious beliefs and practices, as well as connect people to the larger society so that they are more likely to be civically engaged. The next two chapters explore the degree to which network structure can vary and contribute to the well-being of people of faith. More specifically, Chapter 7 examines how the density of peoples' networks varies in terms of religious tradition (i.e., church, sect, and new religious movements), while Chapter 8 delineates how social networks affect the happiness and health of people of faith. The final two substantive chapters consider how social networks can lead to conflict and violence. Chapter 9 examines how conflict between groups can lead to internal cohesion (i.e., network density), as well as creativity, while Chapter 10 shows how network density and isolation can increase the likelihood that a group will radicalize and sometimes engage in violence. Each of the first ten chapters includes a "For Further Reading" section for readers who want to pursue the chapter's topics in more depth. A concluding chapter summarizes some of the book's findings and considers ethical issues unique to social network research, while the three appendixes provide readers with a glossary, a brief discussion concerning definitions of religion, and an overview of software available for social network analysis.

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Four communities of interest should find this monograph useful. The first of these are social network analysts who are interested in gaining a greater understanding of the social scientific study of religion and how researchers have explored the interplay of networks and religion. As I noted earlier, there has been very little formal social network analysis of religious belief and practice; thus, it is likely that most network researchers are relatively unaware of existing research. The book should also find an audience among social scientists of religion who are interested in sharpening their SNA skills. Although this book will not include worked examples, such as those found in de Nooy et al. (2011) and Everton (2012a), a companion website does,⁷ which will enable those who are interested to learn “how” to do formal SNA. Third, social scientists of religion may also be interested in including a network analysis text in their graduate and undergraduate classes. Because the worked examples are pushed to the companion website, the book should not prove to be too daunting for undergrads, while the availability of worked examples can provide additional “meat” to graduate level classes. Table P.1 summarizes how this proposed book could be incorporated into a social science (or sociology) of religion class. Finally, students who are looking for a text that not only introduces them to SNA but also applies it to a specific phenomenon would undoubtedly find this book helpful. It is often easier to learn a new methodological discipline when it is set within a particular context.

⁷ See <https://www.seaneverton.com/networks-and-religion>

Table P.1 *Social scientific study of religion topics by chapter*

Part	Chapter	Short Title	Select Social Scientific Study of Religion Topics												
			Social Network Analysis Topics & Methods	Church & Sect	Gender	Health	New Religious Movements	Politics & Conflict	Race & Ethnicity	Secularization	Social Class	Theory			
Introduction	1	Religion's Surprising Persistence	N/A					X							X
	2	What Is SNA?	Assumptions, Concepts, Data Collection	X											X
Ties That Bind	3	Recruitment & Conversion	Structural Location, QAP, ERGMs, ALAAMs					X		X					
	4	Commitment & Conformity	Homophily, Influence								X				
Ties That Loose	5	Diffusion & Innovation	Diffusion, Archeological Networks		X			X			X				
	6	Politics & Community	Social Capital, Hypernetworks							X					
Ties That Build Up	7	Networks & Tradition	Density, Ego Networks					X							X
	8	Health & Happiness	Closure, Topography, Simulation						X				X		
Ties That Tear Down	9	Conflict & Cohesion	Topography Centrality, Balance, Subgroups							X					
	10	Radicalization & Violence	Topography, Closure, SAOMs, Coevolution							X					X
Conclusion	11	Lessons Learned	N/A												

Acknowledgments

I first became aware of the interplay between networks and religion after Chuck Powers of Santa Clara University asked if I had read Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity* (1996a). I had not, so I picked it up and in the first chapter read about his and John Lofland's (1965) classic study of people converting to the Moonies. This began what became a life-long fascination with social networks, so when I landed at Stanford University in the fall of 1999, I joined (thanks to the prodding of one of my classmates, Jen van Stelle) Mark Granovetter's "Networks of Silicon Valley" working group at Stanford University. Within a couple of weeks, Mark assigned me the task of using existing software packages to visualize social networks, a task that not only resulted in the writing of a visualization manual for the working group (Everton 2004) but helped further my own interest in SNA. Mark ultimately became my advisor, and to say that his influence on my own work has been profound would be an understatement. That said, he should not be held responsible for any of the conclusions I draw in the pages that follow.

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⁸ Unfortunately, my dad (Harold) passed away in the Spring of 2015.