PART I

Theoretical frameworks: the problem of religion in sociology

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Introduction: etymological roots

The definition of religion has for a long time confounded the sociology of religion. The basic issue is common to sociology as a whole and it concerns the problem of the cultural specificity of our basic concepts. Our understanding of religion may have only small relevance to other societies. In part because Christianity was in the nineteenth century associated, rightly or wrongly, with Western colonialism, there is the suspicion that the definition of religion in the social sciences will be heavily coloured by Christian assumptions. This issue comes out very clearly in Max Weber's comparative sociology of religion, in which, for example, it is not clear that Confucianism is a religion at all. Belief in a High God is largely absent from Asian religious cultures and Confucianism is perhaps best regarded as a state ideology relating to social order and respect for authority. Similarly, Buddhism may be understood as 'the Righteous Way' (*Dharma*) that develops meditation practices to regulate human passions. Daoism is typically a system of beliefs and practices promoting health and longevity through exercises such as breathing techniques. Syncretism is also a notable characteristic of China, especially between Buddhism and Daoism, and hence these religious traditions often overlap and borrow from each other. There was also a cultural division of functions in which Confucianism was important in family concerns, Buddhism for funeral services and Daoism for psychological and health matters.

Weber and Durkheim had very different strategies in trying to define religion. Durkheim, in search of a generic definition in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 2001), treated religion as simply one aspect of a more general question of classification. For him, religion involved the classification of phenomena into the sacred and profane, that is, things that are set aside and forbidden. However, Durkheim was less concerned with beliefs and more interested as a

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sociologist in how religious practices demarcate the classificatory boundaries and further how collective experiences constituted communities. Scattered Australian aboriginal groups are brought together periodically by their common religious practices with the result that their sense of belonging is regularly re-invigorated during episodes of collective emotional euphoria. Durkheim was concerned to understand religion as such rather than the different manifestations of the sacred in world religions.

By contrast, in *The Sociology of Religion* Weber (1966) was probably less concerned with these anthropological questions and more interested, from the perspective of historical and comparative sociology, in how religious orientations contribute to general patterns of social change. His most famous work in the sociology of religion – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002) – was a study of the social and economic role of the Protestant sects in the rise of rational capitalism. Consequently Weber was interested in the study of religions in all of their complexity and diversity in the comparative study of human civilisations. Whereas Durkheim had begun his work on aboriginal religion with a long and complicated analysis of the sacred, with the scientific goal of providing a generic definition of religion, Weber argued that a satisfactory definition of religion could only be attempted as the conclusion to scholarly research.

One consequence of these definitional problems is that we must remain sensitive to the actual meaning and origins of the words we use to describe religion and the sacred. Derrida, in 'Faith and Knowledge' (1998: 34) notes, following Émile Benveniste's (1973) *Indo-European Language and Society*, that the word 'religion' (*religio*) has two distinctive roots. Firstly, *relegere* means to bring together or to harvest. Secondly, *religare* means to tie or to bind together. The first meaning indicates the religious foundations of any social group that is gathered together, while the second points to the disciplines that are necessary for controlling human beings and creating a regulated and disciplined life. The first meaning indicates the role of the cult in forming human membership, while the second meaning points to the regulatory practices of religion as the discipline of passions. This distinction formed the basis of Kant's philosophical analysis of religion and morality. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* ([1763] 1998), Kant distinguished between religion as cult, which seeks favours from God through prayer and offerings to bring

healing and wealth to its followers, and religion as moral action that commands human beings to change their behaviour in order to lead a better life. Kant further elaborated this point by an examination of 'reflecting faith' that compels humans to strive for salvation through faith rather than the possession of religious knowledge. The implication of Kant's distinction was that Protestant Christianity was the only true 'reflecting faith', and in a sense therefore the model of all authentic religions. Kant's distinction was fundamentally about those religious injunctions that call men – I use this gendered form deliberately – to moral action and hence demand that humans assert their autonomy and responsibility. In order to have autonomy, human beings need to act independently of God. In a paradoxical fashion, Christianity implies the 'death of God' because it calls people to personal freedom and autonomy without any divine assistance. Hence the Christian faith is ultimately self-defeating, because human maturity implies that an autonomous individual would no longer need the support provided by institutionalised religion. The paradoxical consequence, which has been observed by many philosophers after Kant, is that the very success of Christianity in creating human independence is the secularisation of society.

These Kantian principles were almost certainly influential in the sociology of Max Weber. In *The Sociology of Religion* (1966), Weber distinguished between the religion of the masses and the religion of the virtuosi. While the masses seek comforts from religion, especially healing, the virtuosi fulfil the ethical demands of religion in search of spiritual salvation or personal enlightenment. The religion of the masses requires saints and holy men to satisfy their needs, and hence charisma is corrupted by the demand for miracles and spectacles. More importantly, Weber distinguished between those religions that reject the world by challenging its traditions (such as inner-worldly asceticism) and those religions that seek to escape from the world through mystical flight (such as other-worldly mysticism). The former religions (primarily the Calvinistic radical sects) have had revolutionary consequences for human society in the formation of rational capitalism. The implication of this tradition is paradoxical. First, Christianity (or at least Puritanism) is the only true religion (as a reflecting faith), and secondly Christianity gives rise to a process of secularisation that spells out its own self-overcoming (*Aufhebung*).

The history of the sciences of religion and religions

The emergence of a science of religion and religions in which the sacred became a topic of disinterested, objective inquiry was itself an important statement about the general character of social change. Indeed, such a science of religion might itself be taken as an index of secularisation. The very development of the sciences of religion implies an important level of critical self-reflexive scrutiny in a society. In the Western world, the study of 'religion' as a topic of independent inquiry was initially undertaken by religious men (typically theologians) who wanted to understand how Christianity as a revealed religion could be or was differentiated from other religions. The need to study religious diversity arose as an inevitable consequence of colonial contact with other religious traditions (such as Buddhism) and with phenomena that shared a distant family resemblance with religion, such as fetishism, animism and magic. Because the science of religion implies a capacity for self-reflection and criticism, it is often claimed that other religions that have not achieved this level of introspection do not possess a science of religion. While different cultures give religion a different content, Christianity was a world religion. For G. W. F. Hegel, religion and philosophy were both modes of access to understanding the Absolute (or God), and the philosophy of religion differed from theology in that it was the study of religion as such. In Hegel's dialectical scheme, the increasing self-awareness of the Spirit was a consequence of the historical development of Christianity. The philosophical study of religion was an important stage in the historical development of human understanding.

There is an important tension between religion and philosophy in terms of their claims to truth. This tension is between revelation and reason as different modes of understanding. The Enlightenment was significant in the development of classifications of religion, since the Enlightenment philosophers typically treated religion as a form of false knowledge. The Enlightenment philosophers emphasised the importance of rational self-inspection as a source of dependable understanding against revelatory experiences. For Hume, Voltaire and Diderot, Christianity was a form of irrational or mistaken knowledge of the world, and hence the Enlightenment sharpened the distinction between revelation and reason as the modes of apprehension of reality. The sciences of religion are a product of the Enlightenment

in which knowledge of religion was important in the liberation of human beings from the false consciousness of revealed religion. Diderot was specifically critical of Christian institutions, and Hume, who was critical of the claims made by revealed religion for miracles, wrote somewhat ironically of the differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. The former religions are more likely to support authoritarian states, while the polytheistic traditions are more conducive to pluralism. The Enlightenment associated political intolerance with monotheism in general and Catholicism in particular, and advocated the separation of church and state as a necessary condition of individual liberties.

While Enlightenment philosophy was overtly hostile to religious institutions, the Enlightenment itself had an important impact on religious thought. The Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, emphasised the rational individual, natural law, natural rights and religious toleration. The Jewish Enlightenment sought to make Jews equal citizens with their Christian and secular counterparts in European societies. Moses Mendelssohn played an important part in presenting Judaism as a rational religion, and these European developments partly paved the way towards Zionism. The problem of religion as a form of rational knowledge also preoccupied the young Marx, who in 'the Jewish Question' argued that the 'solution' to the Jewish problem was their movement into the urban proletariat and adoption of secular socialism, but the final emancipation of the Jewish worker could not be achieved by political emancipation alone without a total transformation of capitalism. The point of Marx's argument was that the final demise of religion as a form of consciousness could only be achieved through a transformation of the actual structure of society.

In other societies similar developments took place. In Russia, Peter the Great was responsible for imposing many of the ideas of the Enlightenment on a society that was historically backward. The building of St Petersburgh was to demonstrate architecturally the importance of Western reform and Enlightenment values. Russian Orthodoxy was held to be a particularly barbaric form of Christian religion. Peter's contact with German Enlightenment resulted in a combination of German Pietism and the rationalism of Leibniz. In this form of benevolent despotism, modernisation and the Enlightenment ensured that opposition to these foreign cultural standards involved a combination of Russian nationalism and Russian Orthodoxy.

In fact, the relationship between the Enlightenment and religion was a good deal more complex than this introductory note might suggest. One might argue more accurately that the Enlightenment philosophers were hostile to institutionalised Christianity, specifically the Roman Catholic Church, rather than to religion *per se*. If we set the Enlightenment within a broader historical framework, it is clear that the eighteenth-century philosophers were drawing inspiration from the Reformation of the sixteenth century and the Renaissance humanism of the fifteenth century. The Renaissance involved a rediscovery of the humanistic literature of Greek and Roman antiquity. The Renaissance placed Man at the centre of learning and knowledge, emphasising human perfection through education, rather than human sinfulness and depravity. This humanistic philosophy was spread by the invention of printing in the mid fifteenth century, and printing in turn facilitated the growth of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Both Christianity and humanism were influenced by the European discovery of the Americas in 1492 and by new routes to China and Japan. Colonialism and the discovery of aboriginal cultures presented a significant challenge to the biblical notion of the unity of humankind. The Enlightenment philosophers had much in common with the Cambridge Platonists and the latitudinarian movement of the seventeenth century, which sought to reject what it saw as the fanaticism of the English Civil War and attempted to present Christian practice and belief as reasonable. The English notion of reasonableness was not quite what Marx and Hegel had in mind by the historical march of rational knowledge and the spirit, but it was a long way from the experiential intensity of the conversionist sects. This broader historical sketch indicates a greater philosophical (indeed theological) continuity between the Christian humanism of Erasmus, the rationalism of Diderot and the dialectical idealism of Hegel; it also explains why their contemporaries suspected a political plot between freemasonry and the Enlightenment to attack the Roman Catholic Church.

While we commonly refer to the Enlightenment as if the Enlightenment philosophers shared the same ideas, there was, for example, a substantial difference between Rousseau and Voltaire over the question of religion. In Rousseau's famous letter to d'Alembert, in which he complained about the ways in which the modern theatre could corrupt the citizens of Geneva, the real target of Rousseau's argument was Voltaire, because in the debate about the theatre Rousseau

demonstrated that he had clearly abandoned the underlying secular principle of the Enlightenment. The context of their dispute was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which had all but levelled the city. Rousseau had responded to that disaster as a social rather than a natural crisis; if people had not been living in large cities, these earthquakes would not have had such disastrous consequences. While the event was catastrophic, the universe as a whole was good. Voltaire satirised Rousseau's position, which was based on Rousseau's need to believe in a just world and a living God. Rousseau replied that he had suffered too much in this world not to believe in a better world. As a result, Rousseau resented Voltaire's optimistic secularism. Voltaire, who was rich and famous, could not stop complaining about the world, while Rousseau, poor, obscure and sick, took pleasure in his own situation. In attacking the Parisian theatre, Rousseau was defending the lifestyle of the artisans of Geneva against the wealthy families of the Genevan upper class 'who were building ostentatious mansions, adopting a lavish lifestyle, and looking to Paris for culture' (Damrosch, 2005: 300). In this exchange, it became clear that Rousseau was defending a version of Deism in which he rejected the idea of the corruption and depravity of the human soul, arguing on the contrary in *Emile* ([1762] 1979) that it is society that corrupts the natural goodness of the child who must be protected from the immortality and shallowness of the modern world, as was amply illustrated in the Parisian theatre. Rousseau did, of course, argue that Christianity, which divides the world into the spiritual and the physical, is inappropriate as a public religion in setting up the division between church and state. In *The Social Contract* of 1762, Rousseau (1973) recommended adherence to a 'civil religion' that would unite the citizenry behind the state. Such a religion should be tolerant and not exclusive, that is, no longer simply a national religion.

Secularisation

In the 1970s and 1980s, religion ceased to be a topic of central importance in sociology, and the sociology of religion was increasingly confined to the study of sects and cults. With the dominance of modernisation theory, it was assumed that religion would not play a large part in social organisation. At best it would be relegated to the private sphere. In short, secularisation, which was assumed to be a

necessary component of modernisation, proved to be enormously difficult to define. Out of convenience I follow James Beckford's discussion in *Social Theory and Religion* (2003) and my own *Religion and Social Theory* (1991) in claiming that secularisation involves the following:

(1) There is the social differentiation of society into specialised spheres in which religion becomes simply one institution to provide various services to its followers or to the community; secularisation is the decline of the scope of authority structures; fundamentalism is the attempt to halt this differentiation.

(2) Rationalisation involves the corrosion of the power of religious beliefs and the authority of religious specialists (such as priests). This argument is associated with Weber's notion of 'disenchantment'. While this argument acknowledges the impact of science on public explanations of phenomena and the conduct of public life, social survey research shows that belief in magic and superstition remains very high in advanced societies. Eschatology can also have a potent role in secular society. In the United States, Christian fictional literature depicting the return of Christ in the publishing series *Left Behind* has sold over seventy million copies. These stories are loosely based on the book of Revelation and this literary genre gives expression to what evangelicals call 'the Rapture', which is a contemporary account of the disappearance of Christians from the earth and their entry into heaven, leaving behind sinners and unbelievers. The series combines a traditional apocalyptic religion with conservative political attitudes. For example, in the struggle with evil forces, the UN appears as the anti-Christ on earth. Around eight million American Christians believe that the Rapture is coming soon, and this transformation of the world is indicated by, for example, the crisis in the Middle East.

(3) Modernisation (often a combination of differentiation and rationalisation) is a cluster of processes emphasising individualism, democratic politics, liberal values, and norms of efficiency and economic growth. Because modernisation undermines tradition, it cuts off the communal and social foundations that supported religion as a traditional institution. However, religion continues to play a role in supporting national, regional or class identities in

industrial capitalism, for example in Northern Ireland, Catholic
France, the Solidarity movement in Poland or the Orthodox
revival in Russia.

(4) Secularisation may simply be the transformation (metamorphosis)
of religion as it adjusts to new conditions. There are many versions
of this argument. Sociologists have argued that the social is essen-
tially religious, and what counts as 'religion' does not decline; it
just keeps transforming. Thomas Luckmann (1967) has argued
that modern societies have an 'invisible religion' that characterises
the transcendence of the everyday world. There is an 'implicit
religion' of beliefs about spiritual phenomena that are not neces-
sarily Christian or components of formal religion. In modern
societies there is 'believing without belonging', because religious
membership and attendance decline, but belief in the Christian
faith is still prevalent.

Over the last two centuries, secularisation in the narrow meaning
(decline in church membership and attendance, marginalisation of the
church from public life, dominance of scientific explanations of the
world) has been characteristic of Europe (especially northern, Protest-
ant Europe) and its former colonies (Australia, New Zealand,
Canada), but not characteristic of the United States, where religion
remains powerful, or in many Catholic societies, especially in Latin
America and Africa. In these societies, Pentecostalism and charismatic
movements have been growing. In Islam, Christianity and Judaism
there have been powerful movements of fundamentalist revival. In
many societies, with the growth of youth cultures and popular culture
generally there have been important hybrid forms of religiosity, often
employing the Net to disseminate their services and beliefs. In post-
communist societies, there is clear evidence of a revival of Orthodoxy
(Russia and Eastern Europe) and Islam (in China), and Buddhist
movements and 'schools' have millions of followers in Japan. Sham-
anism thrives in Okinawa. In some respects, this conclusion is com-
patible with Weber's sociology of virtuoso–mass religion in that
rational and individualistic Protestantism (Kant's moralising faith)
appears to be self-destructive, and there is also an ongoing demand
for mass religious services (Kant's cultic form of religion) in most
human societies. There is one difference here. In the past, the educated