

Introduction

This book begins at the point where my *Religion and Advanced Industrial Societies* (1989) ended. My main argument there was that religion had been at the very centre of the first generation of sociological and anthropological classics but that, over the course of the twentieth century, it had moved into a marginal position.¹ I offered two explanations of the processes that led to religion's insulation against, and isolation from, the principal currents of social scientific thinking. The first explanation was based on some aspects of the ways in which religion had been conceptualised as an object of study. The second relied on changes that had taken place in what counted as religion. My conclusion was that

Religion has come adrift from its former points of anchorage but is no less potentially powerful as a result. It remains a potent cultural resource or form which may act as the vehicle of change, challenge, or conservation. Consequently, religion has become less predictable. The capacity to mobilize people and material resources remains strong, but it is likely to be mobilized in unexpected places and in ways which may be in tension with 'establishment' practices and public policy . . . The deregulation of religion is one of the hidden ironies of secularization. It helps to make religion sociologically problematic in ways which are virtually inconceivable in the terms of the sociological classics. (Beckford 1989: 170, 172)

It seems to me that, since the end of the 1980s, the balance of social scientific evidence has confirmed my analysis. Indeed, the trend towards the de-regulation of religion in some countries, disputes about what counts as religion, and attempts to devise new ways of controlling what is permitted under the label of religion have all increased. This is not the complete picture, of course. Continuity in the beliefs and practices that qualify as 'religious' is also apparent – as is slow, organic change. And there are spurts of intense innovation and originality from time to time.

The point of good social science is no less to keep the short-lived, eye-catching upheavals in proportion than to avoid being mesmerised by what appears to be timeless tradition. This balancing act is always difficult but it can be made considerably easier if the focus of analysis is on the social processes whereby phenomena are categorised as variously

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'not religious', 'religious but unusual' or 'religious and traditional'. From this point of view, sociological studies of, for example, the ordination of women as priests in Christian Churches, the participation of members of the Japanese government in Shinto ceremonies to honour military personnel killed in wars, Hindu nationalism, and the framing of laws concerning religious freedom in formerly Communist lands all exemplify the constant process of framing and re-framing phenomena as 'religious', 'non-religious', 'acceptably religious', 'unacceptably religious', and so on.

Attentive readers will have noticed that these remarks are phrased in a deliberately oblique fashion. In fact, they are not directly about religion as such. They are about *changes in the conceptualisation and regulation of what counts as religion*. I shall explain my reasons for adopting this approach more fully in Chapter One, but it is important to give an early indication of the strategy that will be adopted in this book. The starting-point is the assertion that, whatever else religion is, it is a social phenomenon. Regardless of whether religious beliefs and experiences actually relate to supernatural, superempirical or noumenal realities, religion is expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices and organisations. These expressions are the products of social interactions, structures and processes and, in turn, they influence social life and cultural meanings to varying degrees. The social scientific study of religion, including social theory, aims to interpret and explain these products and processes.

The social scientific approach that underlies this book is only one, necessarily limited, perspective on religion. It is not concerned with the reality status or the truth claims that are made about the objects of religious beliefs. Nor is it concerned with questions about the authenticity of personal experiences attributed to religion. And, while religious texts may provide valuable evidence of religious ideas, neither the exegesis of texts nor the creation of theological systems is directly relevant to my social scientific project. This is not to assert the priority of the social over the sacred; nor is it to consign all things religious to the status of epiphenomena. John Milbank's (1990) criticism of social theorists for tending to assume that religion is only an artefact of social life is certainly applicable to some extreme cases of sociologism. But his criticism misses the point that putatively divine or sublime forces can only be communicated among human beings through cultural media. Consequently, the social and cultural conditions that help to shape the ideas, experiences, texts and intellectual systems that are widely regarded as having divine origins or a religious character *are* central to any social scientific perspective on religion. In addition, the social scientific perspective ideally involves a radical shift of focus. It means abandoning the tendency to regard religion as a

relatively well-defined object. It also means examining critically the social processes whereby certain things are counted as religious. No less interesting to social scientists are the processes whereby prevailing concepts of religion are extended, challenged or rejected. Finally, it means taking seriously the changes that occur over time in everyday conceptualisations of religion.

The approach that I am taking to the social scientific study of religion is, broadly speaking, a 'social constructionist' one. Let me try to be clear about my use of this phrase. It recurs frequently in the language of social scientists and students of culture, but there is wide variation in how it is used (Velody & Williams 1998). Radical constructionists may claim that social reality consists of nothing but text and discourse – the 'universal constructionism' that John Searle (1995) dismisses for good reason. There is nothing more real or accessible than the tissue of language and discursive practice, according to this position (see, for example, Gergen 1999). By comparison, a more modest use of 'constructionism' implies only that human beings create or construct meanings when they interact with each other. Thus, public order, disorder, panics and confidence are constructed as emergent products of myriad human interactions. The meaning that I want to attribute to 'construction' in this book lies somewhere between these two extremes. Without denying the existence of anything other than text and discourse – and building on well-established insights into the constructive and destructive possibilities of social interaction – I seek to analyse the processes whereby the meaning of the category of religion is, in various situations, intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted, re-cast, and so on.

My version of social constructionism leaves entirely open the question of whether human beings, universally or selectively, experience religion in forms that are not pre-constructed by human culture. I am certainly not denying *a priori* the possibility that religion is some form of 'basic' – in the sense of anthropologically necessary – impulse or need, although I do not find the evidence put forward to support such a view persuasive. In any case, it seems to me that the question is irrelevant from a social scientific point of view. For, if religious forces can somehow trump, subvert, bypass or dispense with human agency, then it follows by definition that social science has no way of taking them into account. Nothing can be done about this situation except perhaps to follow the sublime path into mysticism or theology – or, better still in my opinion, to follow Wittgenstein's advice to place a full stop at the point where nothing can be said. 'The ineffable is ineffable' seems to be a logical conclusion of regarding religious forces as beyond human culture. But, since we *are* human beings who live in the medium of meanings, contested as well as shared, we are

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on firmer ground if we limit our investigations to what we can know about the social construction of religion as process and product. Although very few social scientists claim to have the last word to say on religion, their investigations of the ways in which human beings 'do religion' can still be interesting and provocative.

The priority that I assign to 'construction' is not necessarily related to any particular assumptions about ontology ('what there is') or epistemology ('what can be known'). It is merely an analytical strategy, that is, a device or a method employed for the purpose of analysing a phenomenon – in this case, the construction of religion as a complex and variable category of human knowing, feeling, acting and relating. 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. I want to show how the boundary between these two categories is staked out, defended, deployed, attacked, smudged, re-defined or even dissolved. It is a boundary zone that is heavily, perhaps essentially, contested.

I find it strange that social scientists have shown relatively little interest in the 'frontier wars' and skirmishes that occur throughout the border zone (but see Greil & Robbins 1994). They seem to prefer to act, instead, as if there really were separate spheres or domains and as if their task were to capture the differences between them in words and thereby to map the 'real' line of division. It makes no difference to my argument whether their aim is to distinguish between religion and non-religion, sacred and profane, holy and unholy, and so on. All such dichotomies indicate belief in the real existence of non-overlapping spheres or domains.

It makes very little sense, in my view, to think of religion as an object or a subject that could exist independently of human actors and social institutions. Religion does not 'do' anything by itself. It does not have agency. Rather, it is an interpretative category that human beings apply to a wide variety of phenomena, most of which have to do with notions of ultimate meaning or value. The sedimented meanings associated with religion in the course of social life constitute authoritative guides not only to usage of the term but also to social action. The category of 'religion' is an abstraction from, or distillation of, these meanings and actions. As such, the category of religion is subject to constant negotiation and re-negotiation. Its meaning must therefore be related to the social contexts in which it is used.

The central theme of this book is that disputes and conflicts about the social meaning of religion remain lively in the early twenty-first century, whereas discussion of religion in social theory tends to be relatively

dull and poorly informed about these particular disputes and conflicts. My aim is, therefore, to create a more fruitful relation between the major changes that are taking place in the social and cultural phenomena categorised as 'religions' and the theoretical interpretations of them.

It would quickly become tedious if I had to adorn every use of the term 'religion' and its cognates with inverted commas in order to emphasise my claim that they do not denote anything fixed or essential beyond the meanings that they carry in particular social and cultural contexts. I shall, therefore, omit the inverted commas for stylistic reasons, but readers will understand that, in my view, 'religion' is a social and cultural construct with highly variable meaning.

Let me put some descriptive flesh on these dry, analytical bones by means of a timely example. There is no shortage of social theorists prepared to claim that the growing popularity in advanced industrial or late-modern societies of so-called New Age spiritualities and therapies is evidence of various fundamental shifts. A common claim is that the underlying, or 'master', shift is from modernity to late-modernity. The claim is that New Age beliefs and practice represent the advent of reflexive self-monitoring, which is supposedly indicative of significant departures from modern modes of social and cultural life. This particular theoretical 'move' involves the interpretation of beliefs and practices as different as astrology, crystal healing, channelling, yoga and numerology as indicators of a retreat from typically modern ways of being religious or spiritual. Moreover, these late-modern forms of religion and spirituality are supposed to bear a strong family resemblance to new social and cultural forms of work and employment, leisure activities and intimate relationships. The argument is that a particular logic or dynamic is at work in transforming modernity into late-modernity. The implication is that religious changes are merely an effect or by-product of causes that lie in the very long-term evolution of rationality, science and nation states.

However, the level of interpretive ambition and theoretical abstraction is so high in this particular approach to social theory that little consideration is given to the detailed aspects of New Age phenomena. Intricate debates about the meaning of the term 'New Age' are ignored. Empirical studies of the bewildering patterns of interaction between 'modern' and New Age practices are overlooked. Evidence about the distinctly 'modern' forms of organisation and commerce that have grown up around the New Age receive no acknowledgement in the characterisation of late-modernity. And, most importantly, the theory takes little account of the plentiful evidence that New Age forms of religion and spirituality, far from displacing more conventional or modern forms, are merely one small but

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colourful feature of a much more complicated picture of religious change. In other words, the concept of late-modernity offers an interesting interpretation of New Age phenomena but, unless it is combined with the findings of careful empirical research, it represents a highly selective and uncritical perspective on these phenomena and on their meaning in relation to other religious continuities and changes that do not fit easily into the depiction of late-modernity.

What is to be done? My proposal is, first, to explore the tension between the interests of high-level social theory and the interests of scholars who study the social aspects of religion. Second, I advocate scrutiny of the points of tension with a view to improving the conceptual building blocks of the theory, the internal relations between them and the empirical evidence with which to assess the concepts' value. By comparison, I shall devote little space to questions of research strategies and methods. In addition, I plead guilty to the charge that my discussions take relatively little account of religion or social theorising outside the confines of advanced industrial democracies.

Ideally, then, the choice of topics for empirical investigation would be informed by conceptual and theoretical knowledge; and the process of refining and elaborating theoretical understanding would, in turn, take proper account of empirical knowledge. Mutual interaction between theory and empirical investigation does not, of course, resolve all intellectual puzzles or put an end to all disagreements. Nevertheless, it can generate new insights and fresh perspectives simply by exposing to criticism the bases on which existing claims to knowledge are founded. In some cases it may even allow researchers to replicate previous studies (see Van Driel and Richardson 1988; Beckford and Cole 1988).

Even when the outcome of replication fails to produce agreement between different sets of researchers, there is still value in the procedure whereby each 'side' makes explicit its initial assumptions and its justification of methodological choices. A prime example is the on-going debate about the association between religious diversity and religious vitality. Starting with Finke and Stark's (1988) attribution of the USA's high rates of church attendance to the absence of a religious monopoly and to the strength of religious pluralism, the debate prompted a sceptical response from Breault (1989) on technical grounds, an alternative approach to interpreting the history of church participation in the US from Land, Deane and Blau (1991) and from Blau *et al.* (1992), an insistence from Chaves and Cann (1992) on the relatively strong impact of State regulation on levels of pluralism, critical comments from Olson (1998, 1999) on regional differences in the impact of pluralism, and energetic attempts by Bruce (1999: 159) to show that 'choice undermines faith'.

At some junctures Finke and Stark (1998; and Stark and Finke 2001) have responded to some of these criticisms by attempting to place their ideas in a broader context.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that this occasionally ill-mannered and acerbic debate has produced progress in the social scientific understanding of the relationship between religious diversity and religious vitality in the USA. Rather, positions have hardened to some extent, and a self-defensive mood has settled on some of the disputants. Yet, the process of stating assumptions and justifying analytical inferences has undoubtedly clarified many of the issues that were less clear at the beginning. The disagreements still outweigh the points of agreement, but the debate has given social scientists a better understanding of what is at stake in questions about religious diversity, pluralism and vitality. In my opinion, this represents the common pattern of development in social scientific studies of religion. For, amid all the disputes about the validity of data, the reliability of measurements, the comparability of cases and the appropriateness of measures of statistical significance there is also discussion of historical contexts, cultural meanings and conceptual boundaries. It may even be possible to clarify high-level theoretical propositions and to identify testable hypotheses in some cases. This is all theoretical work, and it is one of the main aims of this book to indicate the importance of theoretical ideas to a social scientific understanding of the meanings and uses of religion.

Chapter One lays the groundwork for the longer chapters that follow on the topics of secularisation, pluralism, globalisation and religious movements. It does so by establishing that social scientific perspectives on religion are sceptical towards common sense definitions of religion. I argue that, ideally, social scientists distinguish between the 'first order' notions of religion that actors deploy in everyday life and the 'second order' constructs that serve analytical purposes. In both cases, ideas of what counts as religion are constructed, negotiated and contested. My aim is to show that, far from being a fixed or unitary phenomenon, religion is a social construct that varies in meaning across time and place. It is the task of social science, in my view, to study the processes whereby the social construction of religion takes place at all levels of the social world and with varying degrees of formal authorisation. Of course, first order and second order constructs of religion also meet with resistance and rejection. Agreement on what counts as religion is never universal. Disagreements are sometimes violent and destructive. The following chapters discuss the capacity of the social constructionist approach to enhance the social scientific understanding of change and continuity in some key issues affecting religions today.

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My discussion of ideas about secularisation in Chapter Two comes early in the book. This may give the impression that I regard secularisation as the key to social scientific understanding of religion. This would be a misleading impression, however. My reasons for dealing with secularisation ahead of the other principal topics are twofold. First, the volume of commentary on secularisation is so great that it deserves special attention. Second, the arguments that rage around ideas of secularisation and de-secularisation bring to light many broader issues concerning the social construction of religion. Consequently, secularisation is 'good to think with'. The first half of the chapter discusses the deep philosophical and ideological wellsprings of the widely differing ideas that bubble up in arguments about the decline of religion. The second half of the chapter analyses in detail the six main clusters of ideas that I detect in these arguments. They range from the claim that secularisation consigns religion to insignificance as a force in social life to the opposite claim that the eclipse of religion is simply inconceivable. The middle of the range contains attempts to show that religion is not declining but is merely undergoing various metamorphoses. My conclusion is that debates about secularisation are highly revealing about the underlying ways of constituting religion as an object for social scientific analysis and that studies of the social construction of religion in everyday life promise to deliver fresh insights into the struggles to distinguish between the religious and the secular.

The word 'struggles' appears in the previous sentence because I want to emphasise the fact that the social construction of religion and non-religion is, in some cases, the outcome of intentions, policies, strategies and campaigns. Human beings and social agents contend with each other to determine what counts as religion and where the boundary lies between acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion. Chapter Three is an extended critique of the tendency of some social scientists to conceal these struggles behind a problematic use of the term 'pluralism'. The main argument begins with the claim that 'pluralism' conflates three things that should be kept analytically separate: religious diversity, the extent to which the practice of a variety of religions is acceptable, and the positive evaluation that is widely given to religious diversity. I argue that this conflation has its origins in the particular ways in which pluralism was associated with ideas about secularisation in the mid-1960s. The argument goes on to show that more recent work on the management of religious diversity illustrates the need to take seriously the political opportunity structures within which individuals and collectivities compete, and sometimes conflict, in their attempts to determine the limits of religious tolerance and acceptability. A case study of the 'political economy' of

prison chaplaincy demonstrates some of the struggles that occur over access to prisoners, resources and respect. The conclusion discusses some of the objections that social scientists have raised against insufficiently critical notions of pluralism as an analytical concept and as an ideological position. The chapter urges social scientific students of religion to pay close attention to relations of power and conflict between religious groups, for these issues are all too easily masked by uncritical usage of 'pluralism'.

The main theme of Chapter Four is that much of the social theorising about globality and globalisation is problematic because it fails to do justice to the subtlety, variety and complexity of religious phenomena. This is not a pretext for abandoning all notions of the global, however. On the contrary, it is a plea for conceptual clarity and for greater familiarity with the findings of research into religion under conditions of globality. The first phase of the argument establishes that religions have long been 'vehicles' of ideas about globalisation, although social theorists do not usually take sufficient account of these ideas. In fact, a review of four influential works on globalisation shows that their analyses of religion are deficient in several respects. In addition to displaying widespread confusion about basic concepts, there is a strong tendency for social theorists to simplify, and to exaggerate the significance of, religious fundamentalisms. They also neglect evidence of the complex interweaving of globalisation and non-fundamentalist forms of religion. The concluding section discusses a range of anthropological and sociological studies that demonstrate the usefulness of thinking critically about the mutual connections between religion and globalisation. The conclusion is that, if social theorists accepted the challenge of explaining these varied connections, the social scientific understanding of globalisation would be significantly enhanced.

The focus of Chapter Five is on the challenges that religious movements represent for social theories. The main argument is that there has been an imbalance between the impressive volume of empirical investigations and the comparatively meagre amount of attention to their theoretical significance. A critical review of normative functionalist, phenomenological and Marxist approaches shows that social scientists have tended to regard religious movements primarily as marginal or deviant phenomena. What is more surprising is that the sociological literature on new social movements also tends to categorise religious movements as having little significance for an understanding of the major fault lines, grievances and conflicts of late modern societies. But there are three sets of theoretical ideas that have proved capable of throwing explanatory light on religious movements *and* of showing how the waxing and waning of religious

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movements can help to explain aspects of societal change. The roots of these theoretical ideas lie in the resource mobilisation model of social movements, rational choice theory and a variety of approaches to culture and identity under conditions of post-modernity. The findings of research embodying these ideas show that developments in religious movements are closely associated with patterns of social and cultural change. The challenge is for social theorists to take better account of the evidence of these developments and thereby to realise that religious movements, far from being necessarily deviant or marginal, are an integral part of social and cultural change. At the same time, social scientists would benefit from examining major developments in social theory to see how far they can enhance our understanding of religious movements.

The concluding chapter explains how a social constructionist perspective throws new light on the topics of secularisation, globalisation, religious diversity and religious movements whilst also forging closer links with social theory. The contested frontiers and boundaries between religion and non-religion are central to each topic. It is also argued that recent developments in theoretical ideas about the self and society in late modern conditions can enhance our understanding of religion's continuing significance – especially in conjunction with ideas of self-reflexivity, post-modernity, rational choice, 'postemotionality' and embodiment. Paradoxically, the parallel themes of individualisation and standardisation are shown to run through many attempts to capture late modern developments in the social construction of religion. Only a social constructionist approach, it is argued, can do justice to these kaleidoscopic developments.

Although this book advocates the use of a social constructionist approach to the social scientific study of religion, I do not discount other theoretical approaches. On the contrary, I recognise that it is compatible with, if not required by, many other approaches. My aim is not to be exclusive but inclusive – in the interest of fomenting dialogue. I also recognise that the social constructionist approach has its limitations and is not immune from criticism. On balance, however, I am confident that it is an approach that throws into sharp relief some of the most intriguing and challenging aspects of what counts as religion today.