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Social Theory and Religion

Many aspects of religion are puzzling these days. This book looks at ways of improving our understanding of religious change by strengthening the links between social theory and the social scientific study of religion. It clarifies the social processes involved in constructing religion and non-religion in public and private life. Taking illustrations of the importance of these boundaries from studies of secularisation, religious diversity, globalisation, religious movements and self-identity, James A. Beckford reviews the current state of social scientific knowledge about religion. He also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of a wide range of theoretical attempts to account for religious change and continuity. The discussion goes in two directions. The first is towards identifying ways in which studies of religion would benefit from taking better account of themes in recent social theory. The second is towards identifying reasons for social theorists to pay more attention to the findings of empirical investigations of religion. The book will be of interest to social scientists, philosophers, theologians and specialists in religious studies.

James A. Beckford is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick. His previous publications include *The Trumpet of Prophecy. A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (1975), *Cult Controversies. The Societal Response to New Religious Movements* (1989), *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (1989), and *Religion in Prison. 'Equal Rites' in a Multi-Faith Society* (with S. Gilliat, Cambridge, 1998).

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To my family

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Preface

This book has been a long time in the making. I have been fortunate to receive support and encouragement from many people who have helped me in various ways to complete the project. First, my good friend in Chicago, Fritz Huchting, dignified it from the beginning with the title of *The Summa*. My much younger colleague in Århus, Lene Kühle, kept chipping away at the initial weaknesses in one chapter. Meanwhile, Danièle Hervieu-Léger extended to me the generous hospitality and the intellectual stimulation of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Further encouragement came from Françoise Champion, Jean-Paul Willaime and Véronique Altglas at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. Finally, the Study Leave Committee of the University of Warwick supported the work at a crucial stage.

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As ever, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to the members of my family who have displayed exactly the right blend of curiosity, forbearance and love to keep my motivation high.

Abbreviations

ACM	Anti-cult movement
CCC	Celestial Church of Christ
CIRF	Commission on International Religious Freedom
IRFA	International Religious Freedom Act
ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
ISSR	International Society for the Sociology of Religion
MILS	Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRM	New religious movement
NSM	New social movement
RCT	Rational choice theory
SGI	Soka Gakkai International
TM	Transcendental Meditation
UCKG	Universal Church of the Kingdom of God
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association