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PART ONE

Religion as a Field of Sociological
Knowledge

CHAPTER ONE

The Sociology of Religion in Late Modernity

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If there had been any doubt about the sociological importance of religion, the terrorist events of Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, and their aftermath renewed our awareness that religion matters in contemporary times. The terrorist actions crystallized how adherence to a religious fundamentalism can destroy lives and forever change the lives of many others. The public's response to the terrorist attacks pointed to a different side of religion: the positive cultural power of ritual to recall ties to those who have died and to reaffirm communal unity and solidarity in a time of trial. Who would have thought that at the beginning of the twenty-first century improvised public memorials mixing flowers, photographs, steel and styrofoam crosses, and candlelight vigils would illuminate downtown Manhattan, that most modern and urbane of metropolises?

Clearly, the dawning of a new century has not been accompanied by the eclipse of religion in individual lives and in public culture. Despite, and perhaps because of, disenchantment with our increasingly rationalized society, religion continues to provide meaning and to intertwine daily social, economic, and political activity. That the continuing significance of religion in late modern society was not anticipated by classical social theorists and is at odds with much of contemporary theory is due to many factors. From an intellectual perspective it largely reflects both the overemphasis on reason and the tendency to relegate religion to the realm of the nonrational that are characteristic of modern social thought. Starkly phrased, the former places a calculating, instrumental rationality as the overarching determinant of all forms of social action while the latter sees religion and reason as inherently incompatible.

The dominance of instrumental reason envisaged by Max Weber (1904–5/1958) has certainly come to pass. Few would challenge the view that an economic-technological rationality is the primary engine of our globalizing society. The logic of free trade, for example, gives legitimacy to companies to relocate to cities, regions, and countries where production costs are comparatively lower. Technological development allows corporations to have more cost-effective communication with their customers via the Internet, and consequently many companies have chosen to bypass the human distributors whom until very recently were a key component of their corporate relational network; travel agents and car dealers are two such visible groups of “techno-victims.” When Boeing relocated from Seattle to Chicago and when Guinness relocated from Ireland to Brazil the means-end calculations did not quantify the costs of community

disruption or the emotional and cultural loss attendant on disrupting the homology of symbol and place. In today's world, as exemplified so well by professional sports, teams are moveable and fan loyalty is almost as commodified as the players' contracts.

The rationality codified in the professions as a whole means that specialization rather than renaissance breadth is the badge of honor. Thus in sociology, as Robert Wuthnow argues (Chapter 2), subspecialization rather than personal bias largely accounts for many sociologists' inattention to questions in subfields such as religion because they perceive them as falling outside their primary specialization. Even though sociology emphasizes the interrelatedness of social phenomena, institutional practices (e.g., publishing and promotion decisions) and the rational organization of the discipline require specialization (e.g., the separate sections within the American Sociological Association, each with its own membership, council, and newsletter).

Yet despite the dominance of a calculating rationality there also are many instances of nonstrategic action and of contexts in which both coexist. Ethics still have a place in individual and corporate behavior even in the most strategic of techno-economic domains. For example, Cantor Fitzgerald, the government bonds trader that lost over two-thirds of its employees during the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Center, was widely praised for its initial compassionate response to the victims' families (e.g., providing food and other facilities at a local hotel to cater to victims' families). Although within a week after the attack it cut its missing employees from the payroll stating that this would avoid bookkeeping distortions, subsequently Cantor Fitzgerald executives publicly committed to devote 25 percent of the partners' profits over the next ten years to the victims' families, a decision that seemed motivated more by ethical rather than economic considerations (notwithstanding the good public relations it garnered).¹ More generally, in advanced capitalist societies such as the United States, there is still some recognition that loyalty to family, community, and nation is a legitimate factor in economic decision making notwithstanding the constant evidence of the excesses of corporate greed and their tendency to obscure the hold of ethical behavior in the marketplace. In short, instrumental reason is not the sole engine of modern life; the moral, emotional, or what Durkheim (1893/1997) termed the noncontractual, elements of contract continue to shape social behavior even if frequently in ambiguous ways.

That reason and emotion are intertwined rather than anathema was the focus of Douglas Massey's 2001 presidential address to the American Sociological Association. Massey (2002: 2) emphasized that "humans are not *only* rational. What makes us human is the *addition* of a rational component to a pre-existing emotional base, and our focus should be on the interplay between rationality and emotionality, not theorizing the former while ignoring the latter, or posing one as the opposite of the other (emphasis in original)." The interplay between reason and sentiment is most clearly demonstrated by Robert Bellah's analysis of the "ritual roots of society and culture" (Chapter 3, this volume). Bellah draws on recent advances in neurophysiology, Paleolithic archaeology, ethnomusicology, and anthropology to elaborate the foundations of ritual in human society. He focuses on the centrality of symbolic exchange in human evolution and of the individual's deep-seated need to relate to other social beings. Bellah observes that

¹ See the full-page advertisement by Cantor Fitzgerald, *The New York Times*, October 31, 2001, p. C3. Subsequently, Cantor Fitzgerald reported a profitable fourth quarter for 2001.

the synchronizing rhythm of conversational speech and gesture and the affirmation of social solidarity that they imply recognize, however implicitly, the nonutilitarian dimension, or the sacredness, of social life. Drawing on the creative ambiguity inherent in Emile Durkheim's (1912/1976) conceptualization of ritual and the virtual interchangeability of religious and social behavior, Bellah points to the many expressions of ritual in everyday life – rituals of dinner, sports, military drill, academia, and of politics. He argues that such diverse rituals may “be seen as disclosing an element of the sacred, and thus of the religious, at the very basis of social action of any kind.”

For Bellah as for other sociologists (e.g., Collins 1998; Goffman 1967), ritual is the most fundamental category for understanding social action because it expresses and affirms the emotional bonds of shared meaningful experience and individuals' social belongingness. Bellah is keenly aware that the utilitarian rationality of our market society may obscure and at times destroy bonds of solidarity. Yet, he is unequivocal that “we remain surrounded by ritual in a myriad of forms,” and, “if we look in the right places” we may even see its disclosure in the economic realm.

As underscored by Bellah's analysis, the sacred, or the nonrational, pulsates in many sites and intertwines with formal rational processes. Reason matters but so, too, does the individual's need to connect with others and to experience a sense of social mutuality. Thus as Erik Erikson (1963) theorized, the development of interpersonal trust is critical to individual and societal well-being; social life requires us to have meaningful and purposeful relations with others. It is precisely the enduring need for human interconnectedness that makes the search for some form of communal solidarity a smoldering ember stoking much of social action. The power of religion lies, in part, in the resources it provides toward the creation and shaping of meaningfully connected individual and communal lives; the religious or the sacred thus endures notwithstanding the overarching presence of rationality in society.

REASON IN RELIGION

Having emphasized that the nonrational is constitutive of human society, it is important also to acknowledge that reason has a solid place in religion. Much of social theory leaves this unsaid. Consequently it is sometimes assumed that religion and practical reason are incompatible. This perspective is most clearly evident in the writings of Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987). Habermas rejects a one-sided rationality that privileges strategic action and instead proposes a nonstrategic, communicative rationality grounded in a process of reasoned argumentation. In doing so, however, he negates the relevance of nonrational elements to communicative exchange. He dismisses arguments that he sees as tainted by their association with sentiment, faith, and tradition, and therefore omits a huge sweep of resources used in everyday practices. Although Habermas is right in being suspicious of the ways in which sentiment and tradition frequently obscure the power inequalities that allow some “truths” to dominate institutional practices, his strict boundary between religion and reasoned argumentation presents religion as a monolithic, dogmatic force. He thus ignores the openness of diverse religious traditions to reasoned self-criticism and debate and the centrality of doctrinal and practical reasoning in individual and collective interpretations of religious teachings (Dillon 1999b).

In the same way that strategic and nonstrategic action coexist, overlap, and can be compartmentalized in daily life, religion and reason, too, coexist and can be

interspersed and segmented within religious traditions and in individual and institutional practices. For many individuals and groups, the continuing relevance of religion derives from the fact that religious institutions, doctrines, and practices are, at least partially, open to reasoned criticism and to change. Although the founding narratives of religious traditions may be seen as divinely inspired, their subsequent institutionalization is a social process. Because religious institutions are social institutions whose practices evolve over time and adapt to changing cultural and historical circumstances, the boundaries of religious identity are contestable and mutable.

For example, many practicing Catholics maintain their commitment to Catholicism while nonetheless challenging church teachings on gender and sexuality. Feminist Catholics invoke historical and doctrinal reasons, such as the presence of women in scriptural and historical accounts of early Christianity and church doctrines on equality, to argue against what they see as the theological arbitrariness of the church's ban on women priests. Similarly, gay and other Catholics question why official markers of Catholic identity give substantially greater weight to sexual morality than to the living out of everyday Christian ethics of justice. Many of these Catholics, therefore, stay Catholic but reflexively critique Catholicism and do so in ways that enable them to be not only Catholic but to meld their religious and other social identities. Indeed, in this regard, the negotiation of religious identity in contemporary America provides a good exemplar of the practical compatibility of what – in a pluralistic and multicultural society – may sometimes appear as anomalous identities (Dillon 1999a: 255–6).

The intertwining of religion and reason in everyday life also means, for example, that although many Americans express belief in God and the afterlife (e.g., Greeley and Hout 1999), this does not necessarily mean that they anticipate actually having an afterlife and, in any case, may go about their daily activities with a certain religious indifference. Religion matters in many lives and, in public culture but it is not the only or the most important thing and its relevance ebbs and flows relative to what else is going on. In short, across the diverse personal and institutional contexts of daily life reason and religion are sometimes coupled and sometimes decoupled (cf. Dillon 2001).

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The intellectual bias in social theory toward the incompatibility of rationality and religion has residues in sociology as a whole. Although sociology takes vocational pride in examining the unexpected and debunking stereotypical assumptions about human behavior (Portes 2000), it has been slow in moving beyond stereotyped views of religion. It is not surprising that sociology, itself a product of the Enlightenment, should have a long tradition of skepticism toward religion. Karl Marx's (Marx and Engels 1878/1964) popularized idea of religion as an alienating and suppressive force and Sigmund Freud's (1928/1985) emphasis on its illusionary power continue to flicker a dim shadow over the perceived social relevance of religion. Thus in a recent study on social responsibility, Alice Rossi (2001: 22) explicitly acknowledged her "special difficulty" and surprise "as a political liberal and religious skeptic" with the finding that religion emerged as having a major effect. Although a distinguished sociologist, survey researcher, and ex-president of the American Sociological Association, Rossi admitted that she "came close to not including even one measure of religiosity" in family of origin questions (2001: 305).

Notwithstanding the fact that highly regarded research organizations (e.g., the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey) provide cumulative data documenting the persistence of religion as an important dimension of Americans' lives, religion is frequently the forgotten or excluded variable in social scientific studies and literature reviews. It is tempting for sociologists to shy away from incorporating religion because of perceptions that religion detracts from reflexivity and social change and the very act of studying religion might be interpreted as legitimating religious belief. Yet sociologists study small firms, income inequality, and gang violence without any presumed implication that the empirical patterns observed are desirable or that the sociologist has a vested biographical interest in the topic. A research interest in religion is more likely to trigger a hermeneutic of suspicion (cf. Ricoeur 1981). But, as Robert Wuthnow shows (Chapter 2, this volume), the line in sociology as a whole between normative interests and empirical questions is quite blurred. As he points out, the respective theories of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim provide conceptual frameworks for incorporating normative concerns; thus for example, a sociologist can study poverty by using a Weberian analysis to study social class without having to acknowledge that one actually cares about inequality. All sociological topics have underlying normative implications and the sociology of religion is not necessarily more value-laden than other fields. One can be a religious skeptic or a religious believer and still be a good sociologist – that is, being able to recognize the significance of religion when it pertains to the social universe being investigated.

The sociology of religion treats religion as an empirically observable social fact. It thus applies a sociological perspective to the description, understanding, and explanation of the plurality of ways in which religion matters in society. Sociologists of religion are not concerned with inquiring into whether God exists or with demonstrating the intellectual compatibility of religion and science. The focus, rather, is on understanding religious beliefs and explaining how they relate to worldviews, practices, and identities, the diverse forms of expression religion takes, how religious practices and meanings change over time, and their implications for, and interrelations with, other domains of individual and social action. As a social fact, religion is similar to other social phenomena in that it can be studied across different levels and units of analysis and drawing on the plurality of theoretical concepts and research designs that characterize the discipline.

WHY STUDY RELIGION?

Religion is a key construct for understanding social life in contemporary America and in other parts of the world. Religion ought to be of interest to sociologists because (a) it helps shed light on understanding the everyday experiences of the majority of Americans; (b) it is an important predictor of a variety of social processes ranging from political action to health outcomes; and (c) it has the potential to play a vital emancipatory role in processes of social change.

Religion and social understanding. National representative surveys (e.g., Gallup and Lindsay 1999; Greeley and Hout 1999) document that the majority of American adults have a religious affiliation (59 percent), believe in God (95 percent) and the afterlife (80 percent), pray (90 percent), and read the Bible (69 percent), and a substantial

number (40 percent) report regular attendance at a place of worship. Moreover, 87 percent of Americans say that religion is important in their lives. These numbers on their own mean that even if it did not have any explanatory power religion would still have a pivotal role in the process of understanding how modern Americans construe their lives and the social and physical world around them. In view of the salience of religion in America it is not surprising that socioreligious issues (e.g., abortion, the death penalty, welfare reform, stem cell research, prayer in school, public displays of religious symbols, government vouchers for religiously affiliated schools) are a marked feature of political debate and judicial case loads. Religious institutions also play an extensive role in American society with denominational organizations, churches, and religiously affiliated schools, colleges, hospitals, social service agencies, and religious publishing and media companies contributing substantially to the domestic and international economy.

Many of the *Handbook* chapters focus on understanding the role of religion in daily life, with several authors providing information about the rich diversity of practices comprising the contemporary religious landscape. For example, Helen Rose Ebaugh focuses on the religious practices of new immigrant groups in America (Chapter 17). Her comparative ethnographic study of congregations in Houston included, for example, a Greek Orthodox church, a Hindu temple, a Muslim mosque comprised primarily of Indo-Pakistani members, a Vietnamese and a Chinese Buddhist temple, and Mexican Catholic and Protestant churches. As Ebaugh documents, the ethnoreligious practices of these diverse groups significantly impact American religion as well as urban culture through the physical reproduction of home-country religious structures such as temples, pagodas, and golden domes and the use of native construction materials and artifacts. At the same time, Ebaugh shows that, as it was for nineteenth-century European immigrants, religion is a major factor shaping the ethnic adaptation and assimilation patterns of new immigrants. Religion provides a communal anchor enabling immigrants to maintain social ties to their home culture and traditions while simultaneously giving them access to social networks and structures that pave the way for their participation in mainstream society.

Religion as social explanation. Religion does not only help us understand social experiences and institutional practices; it also serves as a powerful source for explaining a wide range of social attitudes and behavior. For example, Manza and Wright (Chapter 21) demonstrate that religion exerts a significant influence on individual voting behavior and political party alignments in America and Western Europe. The religious cleavages they identify in American society include church attendance, doctrinal beliefs, denominational identities, and local congregational contexts. Importantly, as Manza and Wright show, religious involvement is not simply a proxy for other variables such as social class, ethnicity, or region but exerts an independent effect in shaping voters' choices. They observe, for example, that there has not been a significant realignment of Catholic voters since the 1950s and, although Catholics have become more economically conservative, their Republican shift on economic issues has been offset by their increasingly moderate positions on social issues.

Religion as an emancipatory resource. It is common for mass media portrayals to emphasize the negative and defensive aspects of religion. Clearly, this characterization

fits to some extent with religion's role in conserving traditional practices in a time of social change, and its political use in defensive alignments against modern culture. Moreover, as John Hall (Chapter 25) elaborates, there is "an incontrovertibly real connection between religion and violence." The negative aspects and consequences of religion, however, should not obfuscate the potential emancipatory property of religion and the resources it provides in struggles against institutional and social inequality.

Today, diverse faith-based groups challenge inequality both within religious institutions and in other institutional and social locales. For example, Richard Wood (Chapter 26) uses his ethnographic research in California to show how doctrinal beliefs and religiously-based organizational resources are used in community justice projects focused on achieving greater equity in access to socioeconomic resources (e.g., better jobs and health care for poor, working families). He emphasizes the multi-issue, multi-faith, and multiracial character of faith-based community organizing. When Latinos, Whites, African Americans, and Hmong gather together to lobby for health care and share personal experiences and inspirational scriptural invocations, such meetings help to build bonds of social trust both within and across communities. This is a process, as Wood argues, that revitalizes political culture while simultaneously working toward a more just society. In short, across many diverse sites and for many different groups (see also McRoberts, Chapter 28; Neitz, Chapter 20; Peña, Chapter 27; Williams, Chapter 22), religion can become a vibrant resource not solely in resisting domination but in collective activism aimed at eliminating inequality.

THE HANDBOOK

The intention behind this *Handbook* was to bring together current research and thinking in the sociology of religion. The authors were invited to write original chapters focusing on select aspects of their own engagement with the field. For some contributors this involved integrating ideas they have pondered and argued with over a number of years, whereas for other authors it involved discussion of their current research. In either case, the chapters are ambitious; rather than being reviews of the literature on specific topics they are comprehensive and coherent without necessarily attempting to impose closure on the ambiguities, subtleties, and controversies that characterize the sociological study of religion. The intent is not to settle intellectual debates but in some instances to propose new ways of seeing by reframing the questions that might be asked or shifting the frames – of time, space, methods, and constructs – used in researching specific questions.

The *Handbook* provides a compendium for students and scholars who want to know more about the sociology of religion and a resource for sociologists in general who will find that several of the chapters integrate questions in other areas of sociology (e.g., inequality, ethnicity, life course, identity, culture, organizations, political sociology, social movements, health). The collection provides ready access to vibrant areas of inquiry in the sociology of religion. Accordingly, the subject matter covered is broadly inclusive of traditional research topics (e.g., modernity, secularization, politics, life course) and newer interests (e.g., feminism, spirituality, violence, faith-based community action). Some subjects, for a variety of reasons, are not included but are nonetheless important. Questions addressing, for example, the direct and indirect effects of religion on local, national and international economies (cf. Smelser and Swedberg 1994), or the

mutual links between religion and mass media (cf. Hoover 1997), are not discussed in this collection but clearly deserve sociological attention.

The *Handbook* aims to illustrate the validity of diverse theoretical perspectives and research designs and their applicability to understanding the multilayered nature of religion as a sociological phenomenon. The research findings reported draw on comparative historical (e.g., Finke and Stark; Gorski; Hall), survey (e.g., Chaves and Stephens; Dashefsky et al.; Hout; Manza and Wright; McCullough and Smith; Roof); longitudinal life course (e.g., Dillon and Wink; Sherkat); and ethnographic case study, interview, and observation (e.g., Davidman; Ebaugh; Edgell McRoberts; Kniss; Peña; Wood) data. Our ability to apprehend the multidimensionality of a social phenomenon is enriched when we have access to different kinds of data and research sites and are able playfully to entertain the explanatory value of diverse theoretical approaches.

This *Handbook* reflects the specific historical and cultural context from which it has emerged, namely late-twentieth-early-twenty-first-century American sociology. Most of the authors are American, most of the empirical research discussed derives from American samples, and the themes engaged reflect a largely American discourse. Nevertheless, some of the authors are non-American and work outside the United States (e.g., Beyer, Davie, Lazerwitz, Tabory), and several contributors include a comparative cross-national perspective (e.g., Beyer, Davie, Finke and Stark, Gorski, Dashefsky, Lazerwitz and Tabory, Manza and Wright, Hall, Wood). The North American/Western perspective articulated is not intended to suggest that religion is not important elsewhere or that the sociology of religion is not exciting in, for example, Asian or Latin American countries. Rather, the sociology of religion is an engaged field internationally (evident, for instance, in the number and range of foreign conferences pertinent to the field). But to give voice in a single handbook to the important religious trends, topics, and perspectives in a broader selection of countries would not be practical or intellectually coherent. It is my hope, nonetheless, that the substantive questions addressed in this volume will be of use to scholars working outside of American academia and that it will contribute to ferment in the sociology of religion in sites far beyond American borders.

The *Handbook* is divided into six parts. Part I focuses on religion as a field of sociological knowledge. Following this chapter, Robert Wuthnow (Chapter 2), sensitizes readers to some of the tensions in studying religion sociologically and how they can be legitimately circumvented from within the discipline and with an eye to interdisciplinary collaboration. Robert Bellah, as already indicated, provides a strong rationale in Chapter 3 for the enduring social relevance of religion crystallized in diverse everyday rituals. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the societal evolution of religion and of religion as a field of inquiry. Peter Beyer traces the consequences of modernity and of wide-ranging global sociohistorical processes on the construction of world religions and religion's diverse social forms. Beyer focuses on the boundaries between religion and nonreligion, and between religions, and considers the process by which these distinctions get made and their social consequences (Chapter 4). Grace Davie (Chapter 5) examines the centrality of religion in classical sociological theory and elaborates on the different contextual reasons for the subsequent divergent paths that theorizing and research on religion have taken in North America (which emphasizes religious vitality) and Europe (where secularization prevails). She, too, emphasizes religion's global dimensions and points to the contemporary sociological challenge posed by global religious movements [e.g., Pentecostalism, Catholicism, fundamentalism(s)].

Part II is broadly concerned with the conceptualization and measurement of religion and social change. The first two chapters in this section focus specifically on measurement considerations. Michael Hout (Chapter 6) highlights the significance of demography as an explanation of religious stability and change. He shows how changing demographic patterns (e.g., marital, fertility, and immigration rates) alter the religious composition and levels of church attendance, and he emphasizes the importance of having large and detailed data sets so that the direct and counteracting effects of changing demographics on religion can be tracked. Mark Chaves and Laura Stephens (Chapter 7) focus on the problems associated with using self-report measures of church attendance as the standard indicator of American religiousness. They discuss, for example, how social desirability and the ambiguities between church membership, attendance, affiliation and religious sensibility may distort survey respondents' accounts of their church habits, thus complicating sociological assessments of the stability of religious activity over time.

Chapters 8 and 9 engage the ongoing secularization debate in sociology. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, the two sociologists most closely identified with the religious economies model of religious behavior (i.e., that interreligious competition enhances religious participation) draw on their extensive historical and cross-national research to argue for the greater explanatory value of their perspective over a secularization paradigm (Chapter 8). They emphasize how the supply-side characteristics of a religious marketplace (e.g., deregulation, interreligious competition and conflict) account for variations in levels of religious commitment. Philip Gorski, by contrast (Chapter 9), draws attention to the interplay between sociocultural, political, and religious factors in a given historical context. Gorski argues that credible empirical claims for either secularization or religious vitality must be grounded in a much longer historical and a much broader geographical frame (encompassing, for example, religious practices in Medieval and post-Medieval Europe) than is used in current debates. Moreover, because Christianity is rife with ebbs and flows, any observed decline, Gorski points out, may be cyclical and reversible.

The interrelated links between theoretical conceptualization and empirical data on our understanding of the changing dynamics of religion are illustrated in the final two chapters of this section. Patricia Chang (Chapter 10) discusses changing sociological approaches to the study of religious organizations and the ways in which they converge with, and diverge from, the sociological analysis of nonreligious organizations. She elaborates on the highly decentralized nature of the religious sphere and the significance of the diversity of its organizational forms and institutional practices. Wade Clark Roof (Chapter 11) focuses on new forms of spiritual engagement in American society and their increasing autonomy from traditional religious structures and conventional ways of thinking about religion. His analytical schema recognizes the distinctions but also the overlap between religious and spiritual identities, and he argues for new definitions of religion that explicitly integrate the more psychological aspects of a seeker spirituality with traditional sociological models of religion.

The second half of the *Handbook* is more explicitly concerned with the links between religion and other domains of social behavior. Part III focuses on religion and life course issues. Darren Sherkat's research investigates the life course dynamics of religious socialization (Chapter 12). He shows that, whereas parents are key agents of influence