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Chapter Author(s): Danièle Hervieu-Léger

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Religion as Memory

Reference to Tradition and the Constitution of a Heritage of Belief in Modern Societies

Danièle Hervieu-Léger

From the Decline of Religions to the Dissemination of the Religious: The Context of a Theoretical Revision

Until the end of the 1960s, the sociology of religion was governed by one principal objective: namely, that of illuminating and analyzing the structural connection between the rise of modernity and the cultural and social repression of religion. The readings of the founding fathers of the discipline, dominant up to that time, furnished the theoretical underpinnings for this program: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber have certainly developed radically different approaches to the structures and functions of society, but each has, in his own way, contributed to establishing that the process of rationalization characterizing the advance of modernity is identical to the approaching “twilight of the gods.” The conquest of autonomy—that of the subject as well as that of society—is, from this perspective, effectuated through an ineluctable disintegration of the entirely religion-based societies of the past. This theoretical position has the advantage (especially welcome in the context of a French *laïcité* marked by a positivist tradition) of radically simplifying the relationship, always difficult to establish, of sociologists to their object: if the scientific enterprise consists, essentially, in measuring the processes of religion’s fatal social eviction, the decisive questions concerning the proper makeup of the religious object and the nature of the critical reduction envisioned by sociology can be opportunely dismissed as being of secondary importance. Placing this fundamental epistemological debate in parenthesis could seem all the more justified in that the hypothesis concerning the structural incompatibility between modernity and religion has found ample confirmation in empirical studies of the evolution of the “great religions” in all developed countries. It has,

of course, been observed that the declining rate of actual observance of religious practices, the lessening of the political and cultural influence of religious institutions, and the disintegration of belief do not manifest themselves with equal intensity or take the same form in all national contexts. There is clearly sufficient justification, however, for the point of view that religion no longer subsists in “secular societies” except as an option of personal choice. In this case, the question of the transformation of religion in modern societies has tended to be confused with that of the progressive disintegration of the different religious traditions within the societies and cultures that they themselves helped to shape, but in which they can no longer even hope to play any active role whatsoever.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, changes in the historical evolution of religion have profoundly modified this situation by breaking the continuity (postulated up to that time) between the rationalist hypothesis of religion’s inescapable decline in modern societies and the empirical observation of a loosening of the hold religious institutions had on society. The long-standing rise of new religious movements, the growth of religious (neo)-fundamentalisms, the multifarious reaffirmations in the West and elsewhere of the importance of the religious factor in public life, have all provoked a vast reexamination of the fundamental hypothesis of the sociology of religion. And this at the price, perhaps, of a new form of obscurantism that eclipses the fundamental problem raised by the construction of the religious object as an object of sociological investigation. The statement “Religion exists, we have seen it manifest itself” is as empty a proposition as that which, twenty or thirty years ago, affirmed (in diverse ways, none of which, of course, as caricatural as the following) that “Religion is an ideological cloud: the proof is its ceaseless dissipation in our modern rational world.” Both statements are empty because, in effect, though the religious object is disintegrating, it simultaneously resurfaces, is reborn, circulates, and displaces itself. The intellectual stakes of the present historical situation can be formulated in the following manner: How, from inside the scientific domain constituted by and within the affirmation of the incompatibility of religion and modernity, can one equip oneself with the means of analyzing not only the importance religion conserves outside of the Western Christian world but of analyzing as well the transformations, the displacements, even the revivals it undergoes in this Western world itself?

This question recalls the fundamental debates concerning religion’s future that were already present in the works of sociology’s founders. The Marxist vision of religion’s decline linked the realization of this decline to the total accomplishment of the communist society, and thus, in a way, pushed back its arrival to the end of time. The Durkheimian vision of a “religion of man” capable of furnishing morality with its indispensable transcendent foundation maintains the social necessity of faith over the triumph of science. Both of these perspectives, in two totally different and even antinomical ways, recognize—to a certain point—the impossibility of sociologizing the rationalist hypothesis of the end of religion: the first, indeed, and up to a certain extent, against its own presuppositions; the second explicitly in the logic behind the definition given of religion as the

expression of society itself. The Weberian problematic of the disenchanted world separates the analysis of religious spaces in transformation from all prophecy concerning the meaning of history and accentuates the displacements and resurgence of the religiosity characteristic of secular societies governed by a “polytheism of values.” This has, in theory, provided the possibility of freeing the empirical study of the decline of religion’s hold from the positivist prognosis of the death of the gods in modern societies. This problematic, at the same time, requires that one directly treat the question of the religious productions of modernity itself.

Religions of substitution, religions of replacement, analogical religions, diffuse religions, surrogate religions: these terms express the difficulty of delimiting the obscure constellations that make up these religious productions of modernity. They are, in effect, as exploded, mobile, and dispersed as the modern imagination in which they inscribe themselves: a loose conglomerate of patchwork beliefs, an elusive hodgepodge of reminiscence and dreams that individuals organize in a private and subjective fashion as a response to the concrete situation with which they find themselves confronted.¹ In the domain of Christianity, this atomized state of signifying systems is directly tied to the rupture of a stable link between belief and practice, a rupture that Michel de Certeau places at the heart of his analysis of the explosion of modern Christianity.² Modern Christian belief is—he says—less and less anchored to specific groups and behavioral patterns; it determines fewer and fewer associations and specific practices. The dissemination of modern phenomena of believing, on the one hand, and the evaporation of the socioreligious link that once constituted long-term support for the construction of a religious culture encompassing aspects of social life, on the other hand, are the two inseparable sides of the secularization process, whose historical trajectory is intertwined with that of modernity itself. Nevertheless, beyond the obviousness of this disintegration of the religious in modern societies, one is forced to admit that religion still speaks . . . But it doesn’t speak in the areas where one might expect it to. One discovers its presence—diffuse, implicit, or invisible—in economics, politics, aesthetics, the scientific, the ethical, and the symbolic. Instead of focusing one’s interest on the relationship between the diminishing domain of the religious (that of its institutions and that of the “historical” religions) and other social domains (the political, the therapeutic, the aesthetic, etc.), one is led to an investigation of the diverse surreptitious manifestations of religion in all profane and reputedly nonreligious zones of human activity. But how far should one push this investigation? Should one stop after identifying the discrete but properly religious influences (Christianism, Judaism, Islam, etc.) at work outside of their usual spheres? Or should one investigate the entirety of the believing, ascetic, militant, or ecstatic phenomena that manifest themselves in the areas of economics, politics, arts, and the sciences? Will it be necessary to concentrate one’s efforts on “indisputably” religious phenomena, at the risk of being blinded by their very obviousness, given that it is society itself that thus predefines them? Or, rather, will it be necessary to widen one’s perspective in order

to bring to light modernity's (invisible) religious logic, at the risk of the dissolution of the religious object as such, at the risk as well of giving to the researcher an exorbitant privilege in the selection of the significant facts?

For a sociology of religious modernity, this situation gives true meaning to the operation of "revising" the concept of secularization, an operation that at present preoccupies researchers.³ This operation no doubt consists in fine-tuning the analysis of those processes whereby religious space shrinks or grows in society. But it implies first of all that one ask why the sociology of secularization, oscillating as it does between the problematic of the "loss" of the religious and that of religion's "dispersion," thus produces these circumstantially variable versions of religion. Without returning to all the overused problematizations of both the "loss" and the "return" of the religious, how can one grasp the movement whereby modernity continuously undermines the structural plausibility of all religious systems while motivating new forms of religious believing? In order to advance in this direction, one cannot possibly limit oneself exclusively to the rationalist perspective, which links contemporary religious "revivals" entirely to the de-modernizing pressures created by global crisis and the collapse of modernist ideologies of progress (the latter in their diverse liberal or Marxist variants). The religious paradox of modernity stems not from the failure of this modernity but from the structural contradictions that modernity's expansion ceaselessly provokes.⁴ It is therefore necessary to break with the paradigmatic incompatibility between religion and modernity, and to abandon the corollary idea of the strict opposition between traditional and modern societies. Above all, it is imperative to return to the inescapable question of religion's definition.

Indefinite Religion: New Clothes for an Old Debate

It is necessary to begin by defining what is meant by religion; for without this, we would run the risk of giving the name to a system of ideas and practices which has nothing at all religious about it, or else of leaving to one side many religious facts, without perceiving their true nature.

This recommendation, with which Durkheim opens his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,⁵ may seem all too evident for those who believe that the first and inescapable step in sociological research is to define the object of one's study. And yet for the longest time sociologists of religion were inclined to consider, on the contrary, that methodological prudence required one to avoid all definition of religion as such and to leave "theorizing" to the philosophers. This reticence, justifiable given the impossibility of assigning precise limits to an object coextensive with the human phenomenon,⁶ was for them also a means of defense against the phenomenological temptation to grasp an impossible "essence" of religion. The following consensus was reached: the domain of research of the sociologist

of religion covered all objects that the society itself designated as “religious.” It was admissible, should the need arise, to extend one’s investigation to include the most apparent “analogously religious” phenomena: civil and military rituals, revolutionary cults, and so on. But in this case the relationship between “religion” (in the strict sense of the variants of historical religions) and these “analogous” forms remained carefully untreated.

It is the case, however, that in order simultaneously to understand both the modern proliferation of belief and the deregulation of the domain of institutionalized religion it is no longer possible to maintain this prudent position. If one wants to study how religious beliefs are dispersed and distributed beyond the spaces of believing controlled by the great religious systems, one must be able to identify what, in the modern production of belief, stems from religion and what does not. It is necessary, in other words, to be equipped with a “definition” of religion, one that does not allow us to grasp the ultimate essence of religion but that simply allows for the classification of observable phenomena. To this end, two positions have clarified themselves in the last few years:

1. The first, illustrated in the thoughts of Thomas Luckmann on “the invisible religion” of modern societies,⁷ has recourse to an extremely extended definition of religion, one that encompasses the entirety of the imaginary constructs whereby society, groups within this society, and individuals within these groups try to give meaning to their everyday experience and to represent to themselves their origin and their future.
2. The other, resolutely restrictive, reserves, on the contrary, the designation of religion for those “productions of meaning” that explicitly call into service the capital of references and symbols belonging to the traditions of the “historical religions.”

What is at stake in the act of choosing between these two perspectives is not an issue of abstract selection: this choice directly concerns the practice of research. This made itself particularly clear in the recent American (then European) sociological debate surrounding the rise of what we have come to refer to as “new religious movements.” It is well known that this term covers a great variety of phenomena: cults and sects that have recently come to compete with the historical religions (with the “great churches” or longstanding minority groups), syncretic groups with an oriental influence, revival movements within the organized religions, all of them taking part in the construction of a “mystico-esoteric nebulousity” characterized most notably by its ability to assimilate and reemploy all forms of available knowledge (from the “official” state science to the most marginalized traditional and ancient *savoir-faires*) . . . and this to the end of the self-development of the individual adherent, in both the long and the short term.⁸ These highly diverse groups and networks may “graft themselves onto the great oriental religions, take the form of a more or less antiquated esoteric syncretism, or of a new psycho-religious syncretism, or

they may even gather individuals around the practice of this or that divinatory art (astrology, tarot, or the I-Ching).” These groups maintain ties with journals, publishers, and booksellers; they hold expositions, offer training courses, and arrange conferences. Their followers go from one to the other, taking advantage of this “self-service acculturation, particularly rich in all kinds of offers allowing for a highly personalized composition *a la carte*.”⁹ It is around these kinds of phenomena that the question of the boundary of the religious has been most directly raised, where the debate that provokes the growing dissociation between an “intensive” sociology of religious groups and an “extensive” sociology of phenomena of belief is most concentrated. If these movements offer their followers a kind of “interior fulfillment,” one that can be interpreted as an individualized and secular (and therefore modern) road to salvation, is it necessary to see therein the figure of a new modern religion? Or, due to a lack of reference to any transcendence whatsoever, and because these movements are customarily lacking in a larger social project, must one deny them all the qualification of “religiousness”? More recently still, this discussion of the “limits of the religious” has been stimulated by research grouped around the “secular” or “metaphorical” religions. This research is enriched by observations concerning the very general development of an “invisible” or “diffuse” religiousness that arises without the mediation of the specialized institutions. But it has gotten no less bogged down in the infinite rehashing of the classical debate that opposes a “substantive” (and restrictive) definition of religion (implying, as it always does, belief in a supernatural power), and a “functional” definition of religion (one that sees “religion” as the entirety of “ultimate” or “fundamental” meanings that individuals or groups are inclined to produce in order to make sense of their lives). That is: on the one hand, religion is defined according to the content of its beliefs (e.g., belief in God) and the type of ritualized activities linked with these beliefs—in which case it becomes impossible to say anything about the potentially religious nature of phenomena in which some see the modern forms of “sacredness” (from packed football stadiums to outdoor rock concerts, which unite these Durkheimian “crowds in fusion,” including as well all forms of “secular religiousness”); on the other hand, one stretches the definition of religion to include everything in our societies that touches upon questions of sense and the search for an ultimate meaning of the world in which we live—in which case, religious phenomena are diluted to the point of becoming indefinite nebulosities of “systems of signification.”

Nonetheless, beyond this explicit theoretical conflict, it is not certain that the substantivist and functionalist positions are as antinomical as they formally claim to be. For Luckmann, in whom we admittedly have the most extensive conception of religion, it appears in part that the pulverization of individually constructed meanings that characterizes modern consciousness tends to exclude the integration of these meanings into an organized system of beliefs, a system that would provide collective action with a coherent direction, a power of mobilization, and a stock of imaginary resources. Without these

elements testifying to the exteriorization and projection of individually constructed meaning onto the universe as such, and in the absence of all possible aggregation and systematization of these individual collages of sense, it is difficult to see what remains of the process of “cosmization” that would transform these phenomena of belief into a “sacred modern cosmos.”¹⁰ Luckmann himself considers it highly unlikely that the social objectivization of such themes as self-realization or personal fulfillment—themes that have their origin in the private sphere—give rise either to the articulation of a sacred, well-founded, and closed cosmos or to the specialization of new religious institutions. He nonetheless notes that, within this vague cloud of individual expectations and aspirations, representations that he designates as “specifically religious” may perhaps survive. These specifically religious representations arise from historical and religious traditions and make reference to the “great religions.” Their survival depends, according to Luckmann, on their ability to “function,” that is, to assure the subjective satisfaction of the individual. But the simple act of designating as “specifically religious” those traditional representations that subsist within this sacred modernity shows what little consistency Luckmann himself accords to the invisible “religion,” as well as the implicit weight of substantive criteria, which determine that only the historical religions be considered as religion in the full sense of the word.

A similar ambiguity is visible in the work of R. Bellah and other authors in their studies of the communally shared values of a given society, values that constitute the armature of “civil religion.”¹¹ J. Coleman defines this as the “set of beliefs, rites, and symbols which links the role of man as citizen and his place in society, both temporally and historically, to the ultimate meanings of existence.”¹² Is it a question here of religion “in the full sense of the word,” or is he merely speaking by analogy? For Bellah, this set of “beliefs, rites, and symbols” is “religion” if one admits—as he himself does—that “one of the functions of religion is to furnish a significant set of ultimate values which may serve as the basis for the morality of a society.”¹³ But he remains uncertain as to the possibility that these values, as such, could constitute the “substantive core” of a religion in the same way that Christian, Judaic, or Islamic values constitute the substantive core of these historical religions. The substantive definition of religion exercises, paradoxically, its permanent attraction in the works of the very authors who would free themselves of the limitations it imposes upon both empirical research and theoretical elaboration.

The distance, finally, between this vision of a sacred modern cosmos (this haze of atomized significations) and the restrictive perspective incarnated by the work of B. Wilson is, therefore, less than one might suppose. The latter refuses to consider as “religious” groups and personnel, associations and professionals, whose sole function is to promote, on a case-by-case basis, the harmonization and elaboration of collages of meaning to the sole benefit of the individual. Although Luckmann would probably not refuse to designate the same groups and persons as “religious,” he suggests that “religion,” thus broadened

in its definition, has no effect beyond the subjective satisfaction of the individuals concerned. Yet it is equally conceivable that he could refuse, in the manner of Wilson, to designate as “religious” a behavior that consists in the “ritualistic” washing of one’s car every Sunday morning.

In both cases, the question raised is that of identifying universes of religious meaning within the modern kaleidoscope of available universes of signification.¹⁴ One can again schematize the terms of this debate according to the archetypal positions of Luckmann and Wilson:

1. For Luckmann, the difficult point is the evanescent continuity between the modern universes of signification and the religion that is introduced therein through ultimate reference to a sacred cosmos.
2. For Wilson, the problematic element is the discontinuity raised by reference to the supernatural and utopic. If one, in effect, admits that religious constructs are a part of the universe of meaning that society creates, one cannot fix a definition for these constructs, once and for all and in a substantive fashion, without reifying the historical (premodern) situation that led to the Western mode of religious believing, based on an appeal to the supernatural and on a utopic “Kingdom of Heaven.”

The same objection can be made concerning the definition proposed by Y. Lambert, which seeks to avoid the dissolution of the concept of “religion” in the multitude of responses to “ultimate questions.” His definition, which is meant to be strictly functional, is based upon three discriminating features, whose presence is expressly prerequisite—according to him—in order to speak of religion. The first is the “postulated existence of beings, forces, or entities which exceed the objective limits of the human condition, but which remain in contact with humanity”; the second is the existence of “symbolic means of communication with them: prayer, rites, services, sacrifice”; the third is the existence of “communalizing bodies such as a church, or other body.” The construction of a formal model of religion is here limited to the isolation of those traits that serve as the lowest common denominator of the historical religions. Within the scope of Y. Lambert’s interest in the comparative sociology of historical religions, this definition is perfectly adequate. But it considerably reduces the possibility of exploring, from the point of view of a sociology of religious modernity, the phenomena of recomposition, displacement, and innovation that arise, in part, from the less plausible position that institutionalized religions now occupy in the modern world.¹⁵

If the functional definitions of religion turn out to be incapable of mastering the unlimited expansion of the phenomena they try to account for and thus become empty of all heuristic pertinence, the substantive definitions of religion, constructed around the gravitational attraction of the historical religions, condemn sociological thought to being the paradoxical guardian of the “authentic religion” that these historical religions intend

to incarnate. The former can do little more than attest to the intellectually recalcitrant dispersion of religious symbols in contemporary societies. The latter are caught up in the indefinite reiteration of analyses revolving around the loss of religion in the modern world. Both are partial but radically limited responses to the question of religion's position within modernity. Religion is (tendentiously) nowhere or everywhere, both of which, in the final analysis, mean nothing.

Getting Out of the Circle: Religion as a Modality (Mode) of Belief

In order to escape this circularity, it is first necessary to persuade oneself that the major problem sociologists confront in the analysis of religious modernity is *not* that of finding better criteria for the delimitation of the social space of religion. It is, rather, to equip oneself with the conceptual instruments that, given the impossibility of satisfactorily localizing the contours of the religious "domain," take into account this very delocalization itself.¹⁶ This perspective implies that one resist ontological definitions of religion by turning the act of definition itself toward the properly sociological perspective that necessitates it. What is of interest to sociology? It is not a question of knowing, once and for all, what religion itself is as such. It is a question of understanding the logic behind the transformations of the religious universe, concretely approached through its sociohistorical manifestations. From this perspective, religion's definition is required only as a tool, a practical instrument designed to aid the researcher in his attempt to think socioreligious change, as well as to think the modern mutation of the religious. It is, therefore, necessary to give attention to the process of change itself: religion's definition (if one can still, and without ambiguity, use this term) is a dynamic concept, an ideal-type that does not aim to fix its object but to designate the axes of transformation around which the object reconstructs itself. In order to grasp this process as a global dynamic of the recasting of the religious, one that encompasses, transforms, and reorganizes the historical religions themselves, it is important that all analysis be focused not upon the changing contents of belief but upon *the mutating structures of believing* that these changes in content partially reveal.

Before going further, it is indispensable to define what one means here by "to believe." This term designates the totality of both individual and collective convictions that do not arise from verification, experimentation or, more generally, from isolation and control criteria that characterize scientific knowledge—convictions that have their basis in the fact that they give meaning and coherence to the subjective experience of those who hold them. If one here speaks of the act of "believing" rather than of "belief," it is because the totality of these aforementioned convictions, in addition to the ideal objects of conviction (the beliefs themselves), incorporates the practices, languages, gestures, and spontaneous automatisms in which these beliefs are themselves inscribed. "To believe" is belief in motion, belief as it is lived. It is, according to the definition proposed by de

Certeau, that which the individual or collective speaker *does* with the statement he claims to believe.¹⁷ The notion of believing, thus widened, is able to include the “practical beliefs” characteristic of populations that live within a monistic universe. Here, the notion of belief alone—given the distance it implies between believer and object of belief—seems to make little sense.¹⁸ The act of believing thus understood allows for the presentation of different structural levels of believing: it includes the variety of “bodily states,” treated by Pierre Bourdieu, which are inculcated during initial apprenticeship and of which the initiates themselves are so unconscious that they have the feeling of “having been born with them.”¹⁹ Everything that seems to arise out of one’s “experience with the world as happening all by itself” belongs to the domain of believing. At the other end of the spectrum, one finds all the formalized and rationalized beliefs for which individuals are capable of accounting and which have practical influence upon their lives. In all cases, the actual act of believing, whether it arises from spontaneous evidence or from theoretical conviction, escapes experimental demonstration and verification. At the very most, one can affirm its existence from the point of view of those who believe, from the presence of a network of indices and signs. But from one moment to the next, to believe implies that both individuals and groups submit themselves (consciously or unconsciously) to an exteriorly imposed order, or to a kind of gamble or choice, more or less elaborated, more or less well argued.

To put the act of believing at the center of one’s thinking is to preliminarily admit that believing does in fact constitute a major dimension of modernity. This idea is far from evident. It has often been remarked that scientific and technological rationality have reduced the space of believing in modern societies by displacing the demands for meaning (without which no human society is possible) away from the primordial question of *why* toward the practical question of *how*. But if advances in science and technology have in large part eroded the world’s mysteries, they have not reduced the human need for *security*, which is at the heart of the quest for intelligibility, a need that in effect constantly remotivates the question of why. All lived uncertainty, for both individuals and collectives, raises the specter par excellence of, for the individual, death; for the society, anomy. P. Berger, following Durkheim, has reminded us that the sacred is nothing else but the edifice of signification that humankind objectivizes as a power radically other than itself and that it projects upon reality in order to escape the anguish of being swallowed up by chaos.²⁰ Modernity breaks with the sacred to the extent to which humankind itself, with its own capacities, carries out the work of rationalizing the world in which it lives and of mastering, through thought and action, tendencies toward chaos. But the destabilization alone of “sacred cosmizations” (Berger) occasioned by the process of rationalization does not efface the fundamental need to lessen the structural incertitude of the human condition. But neither does this need subsist as the residue of a now obsolete sacred universe. It arises out of modernity itself, redistributing itself throughout the multiplication of

demands of sense. These demands are all the more exigent in that it is no longer a question, for the agents of society, of thinking their place in a stable world seen as the reflection of the natural order itself, understood as a creation, but of situating themselves in an open social space in which change and innovation are held up as the norm. At the very moment when modernity deconstructs systems of signification (systems that, for the individual and the society, formerly expressed the ideal ordering of their world), even during the very movement whereby modernity demonstrates the possibility of controlling and manipulating this world, it develops, to an enormous and proportional degree, the social and psychological factors of incertitude. Modernity itself, therefore, motivates a rebound of the question of sense and the diverse expressions of protestation against the non-sense that is its counterpart.²¹ The identification of the modern act of believing is carried out through the analysis of these modes of resolving (or, at least, of hiding) incertitude; modes that are refracted in diverse forms of belief. In the mobile, “fluid” universe of the modern act of believing, liberated as it is from the hold of global institutions of believing, all symbols are interchangeable, combinable, and transposable one into the other. All syncretisms are possible, all recycling imaginable. It is from this observation that one can clarify the sociological definition of religion. The search for this definition, as we have already said, has no meaning outside of *a specific point of view*: that which analyses the dynamic of modernity seen not as a thing but as a process, as motion. One must add that this search is justifiable only insofar as it takes into account this specific mobility of the modern act of believing, an act in which the content of belief can no longer be, *a priori*, understood as religious, political, or otherwise. This double petition imposes a radical “desubstantialization” of the definition of religion. It further imposes that one admit, once and for all, that religious believing does not refer to the objects of a particular set of beliefs, to specific social practices, or even to representations of the origins of the world. Religious believing can be usefully defined—in an ideal-typical manner—as *a particular modality of the organization and function of the act of believing*.

The identification of this modality of belief consists—classically—in accentuating one or several of the traits that distinguish this modality from others. The voluntarist nature of this way of constructing a conceptual tool for the analysis of religious believing must not be dissimulated. But the only truly fundamental issue here is to know if this tool is useful, that is, if it permits one (among other possible usages) to grasp that which justifies, beyond the commonplace and obvious analogies between “historical” and “secular” religions, the simultaneous sociological treatment of their situation and evolution within modernity. The stated objective is not only to determine whether the beliefs and practices of some ecological or political group, the emotional investment among the spectators of a football game, or the collective fervor of adolescents at a rock concert can be said to be “religious.” One seeks to know as well whether this or that modern expression of Christianity, Judaism, or some other tradition that society qualifies as “a religion,” can be

characterized according to our definition as effectively being “religious.” Such a perspective rests, therefore, upon the well-reasoned decision to place oneself—beyond the usual hallmarks of religion, that is, the contents or functions proper to belief—within a perspective that permits one simultaneously to grasp these diverse manifestations of belief in order to compare and classify them. The perspective retained here is one that examines the *type of legitimization* that supports the act of believing. At this stage of our research, the hypothesis that we are advancing is as follows: there is no religion without the explicit, semi-explicit, or entirely implicit invocation of *the authority of a tradition*, an invocation that serves as support for the act of believing. Within this perspective, one designates as “religious” all forms of believing that justify themselves, first and foremost, upon the claim of their inscription within *a heritage of belief*.

This proposition must not be taken as the enunciation of a definitive truth suggesting that religion *is*, exclusively and totally, this heritage. It is a *working hypothesis*, a *perspective* that allows for the creation of *one* sociological approach (among others) to the question of religion. This approach is chosen as a function of an intellectual objective: that of accounting for the mutations of religion within modernity. In order to grasp the effective range of this definition, it is necessary to understand thoroughly that this self-legitimization of the act of believing through reference to the authority of a tradition is much more than the simple assertion of a continuity of belief from one generation to the next. The “religious believer” (individual or group) is not content to believe for the simple reason that “it has always been that way”: he considers himself, in the words of the Swiss theologian P. Gisel, as being “engendered.”²² It is not the continuity itself that is of value here, but the fact that this continuity acts as the visible expression of a filiation that the individual or collective believer expressly claims and that integrates him or her into a spiritual community assembling past, present, and future believers. The heritage of belief fulfills the role of legitimizing imaginary reference. It functions simultaneously as a principle of social identification, *ad intra* (through integration into a believing community) and *ad extra* (by differentiation from those who are not of the same heritage). From this angle, “religion” can be seen as an ideological, practical, and symbolic framework that constitutes, maintains, develops, and controls the consciousness (individual or collective) of membership to a particular heritage of belief. From the same angle, religious institutions can be ideal-typically defined as “traditional institutions,” governed by the “imperative of continuity.” This obviously does not mean that religious institutions are immobile and escape change. But it does mean that change imposes itself only to the extent that it is integrated into the collective representation, perpetually renewed, of a continuity that itself always remains intact. Thus it is that the enterprise of religious reform often presents itself as the return to an authentic tradition, which opposes the distortions of tradition apparent in present usage. Or reform takes on the aspect of a deepened understanding of the tradition itself, an understanding that justifies its own innovation or renovation. The prophet, who directly contests the dominant religious order, regularly justifies his mission

by declaiming the necessity of accomplishing what the religious institution has either neglected or forgotten. And the personal revelation of which he is the vessel gives rise to a "religion" only to the extent that it is rendered immutable by becoming the starting point for a new heritage of belief. The imperative of continuity, which imposes itself in the religious domain as such, expresses the founding of the social and religious bond.

Transmission: A Central Question for a Sociology of Religious Modernity

One of the principal implications of this definition is that it puts particular emphasis on the specific type of mobilization collective memory undergoes, a mobilization that is characteristic of all religions thus understood. In traditional societies, where the symbolico-religious universe is structured entirely around an original myth, thus taking into account both the origins of the world and the origins of the group, collective memory is generally a given. It is, in fact, entirely manifest in the structures, organization, language, and daily practices of societies governed by tradition. In the case of differentiated societies, in which the prevalence of founded religions gives rise to self-designated communities of faith, collective religious memory becomes the object of constant reevaluation in such a fashion that the historical event of the religion's founding can, at all moments, be grasped as a totality of meaning. To the degree that all present signification is presumably contained, at least potentially, in the founding event, the past is symbolically constituted as an unchangeable whole, situated "out of time," that is, out of history. In constant contact with this past, the religious group defines itself objectively and subjectively as a *chain of memory*, whose continuity transcends history. The existence of this chain is attested to and made manifest by the specifically religious act that consists in the remembrance (anamnesia) of this past, which gives meaning to the present and contains the future. As a result, religious transmission does more than just assure the passage of a given content of beliefs from one generation to another (through the socialization of newcomers within a community whose norms they accept and who share the community's orientations and values). Insofar as transmission is bound up with the processes of elaboration of this chain of memory whereby a group of believers becomes a religious group, transmission is the very movement whereby the religion constitutes itself in time as a religion: it is the continuing foundation of the religious institution itself.

This proposition contains the possibility of a renewed approach to the religious dilemma of modern societies and, more generally, to the problem of "secularization." One can sum up this approach in the following manner: What becomes of the religious problematic of the continuity of belief in modern societies (and how does one assure the socialization of a universe that remains structured by this imperative of continuity) when these societies have as their distinctive trait, as emphasized by Marcel Gauchet, that of

being governed by an “imperative to change”?²³ In these societies, where the differentiation of institutions has been accomplished, the different spheres of social activity exist, with their own distinct and relatively autonomous logics. Individuals intervene in these milieus, in which they come to terms with the complex “rules of the house,” as demonstrated in the work of F. Dubet, according to their own personal dispositions, memberships, interests, aspirations, and experiences.²⁴ It is out of the combined diversity of these interests and lived experiences that individuals construct—in a world of perpetual change where memory, for the most part, has lost its organizing power—the meaning they give to their own existence. In the area of religion, as in all other areas of their personal experience, individuals are confronted with the lack of an organizational centrality capable of offering them a preestablished code of meaning. This being the case, individuals are incited *to produce* (if they do so at all) a relationship to a heritage of belief in which they recognize themselves. One can finally ask: How, then, given the pluralization of processes that enter into the construction of religious identities (a construction in which the subjective work individuals carry out in order to make sense of their experience is the principal motor), how can collective representation of the continuity of a heritage (and its realization in society) still be assured? This question, stemming from the definition of religion proposed above, sketches the bottom line for a sociology of religious modernity.

—Translated by John A. Farhat