

CHAPTER 7

Sociology of Religion

Titus Hjelm

I always start my class in social theory by asking the students to write down everything they do on a regular morning, from waking up to arriving at the university or work. Usual activities include making coffee or tea, having breakfast, taking a shower, putting on make-up, shaving, brushing teeth, drinking a glass of water, and putting on clothes. Students rarely say much about their journey to the university or work, but with every new cohort, “checking social media” first thing in the morning becomes more prevalent. After discussing their lists, I ask the students to cross out everything except the things they *absolutely* need to do. Here the lists start to vary: for some, going out without make-up or having shaved is unthinkable, while many seem to think that without caffeine in the morning, one simply cannot function.

At this point a couple of students usually get what I am aiming at. Strictly speaking, out of a list like this, the things we *absolutely* need to do in the morning include drinking water and having breakfast. If you live in a cold climate, you also need to put on clothes. Unless we hydrate ourselves, eat, and shelter ourselves from the elements, we will die. Everything else on the list is optional. The idea that we could, weather allowing, leave our homes without clothes seems downright insane to my students. Yet humans have done so in the past, and in some places continue to do so.

My point in this exercise is to show the students how many of the things we consider indispensable to functioning in everyday life are merely *social conventions*. They are part of what sociologists call *society*, or the *human world*: “the aspect of the world, that bears the imprint of human activity, that would not exist at all but for the actions of human beings” (Bauman 1990, 3). The compulsion to put on make-up, to take a shower, or to brush our teeth is not dictated by our biological outlook but rather by standards of

cleanliness and beauty, which are human creations. The fact that so few in the exercise mention using the toilet – another physically necessary thing – is a demonstration of another social convention, that is, that we do not discuss such things in the classroom.

Sociology studies human interaction and the interaction of humans with their environment. Some forms of this interaction are sedimented into more or less stable categories of understanding the human world, such as class, ethnicity, gender – and religion. Sociology is interested in how and why particular persons fall into one category or the other and how the different categories influence one another. Hence many sociological studies are interested in how the frequency of attending religious services affects one's educational achievement. Or vice versa: how educational achievement affects religiosity, or lack thereof. Most important, sociology provides a *way of seeing* how our everyday lives are patterned in particular ways, and why. The sociology of religion provides a framework for looking at how religion affects society and how other social domains affect religion.

Three Approaches

Many introductions to the sociology of religion begin with a discussion of sociological definitions of religion. Few of these formulations are comprehensive enough to cover all variations of what is usually called religion, thereby prompting skepticism over whether we should even use “religion” in the first place. Peter Berger, one of the leading contemporary sociologists of religion, is honest in his assessment of the problem of defining religion when he writes: “I must confess that I find this question sublimely uninteresting” (Berger 2014, 17). I tend to agree.

But definitions are important in terms of how *useful* they are for conducting sociological research. In other words, different definitions are less important for providing answers about “religion” than for guiding the questions we ask. That is why I prefer to write of different *approaches* to the sociology of religion. In my scheme there are three: substantive, functional, and constructionist.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the giants of sociology. He famously stated that any definition of religion should come at the end, not the beginning, of an inquiry, thereby seemingly offering another frustrated view on the issue of definition. Yet even he could not avoid having some kind of approach to the object of study. Weber's work was cut short by illness, and he never reached the end point of his inquiries, where he could define religion. But there are clear clues in his work.

Weber's monumental but unfinished comparison of the economic ethic of the world's major religions is based on his earlier and most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2001 [1904–1905]), where he argued that Protestantism, specifically Calvinism, provided an ethical spur and legitimation for the emergence of a capitalist mode of production. Ethics in turn was for Weber an outcome of particular beliefs regarding salvation. Weber's big question was why capitalism developed first in Calvinist Europe and only later, if at all, in other cultures, which, as in China, were sometimes much more advanced than Europe. In order to study this, he

focused, following the model of *The Protestant Ethic*, on how beliefs regarding salvation in the world's religions enabled or constrained the emergence of a particular economic ethic. Hence although reluctant to provide an explicit definition of religion, Weber had an implicit sense of what he was studying. Weber's approach to the study of religion was *substantive*. In other words, he was interested in *what religion is*.

The problem of substantive approaches to the sociology of religion is that they continue to bear the marks of a Christianity-centered view of religion, leading to an emphasis on belief and practice. This is most obvious in statistical surveys of religion, where the most common variables include different beliefs ("do you believe in God?"), belonging ("are you a member of a religious community?"), and frequency of practices ("how often do you attend church?"). Qualitative inquiry may lend more nuance to the approach, but even in these cases the focus tends to be on the meanings given to "belief" within formal expressions of religion, as opposed to everyday, or "lived," religion. The sociological upside of a substantive approach is that it clearly demarcates religion from non-religion, often by positing belief in the supernatural or a higher power as the difference.

When "belief" and institutional membership are difficult to impose on practices that otherwise seem to fit the term "religion," there must be another way of defining religion. Where substantive approaches consider religion in terms of its content, functional approaches ask *what religion does*. It is the work of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) above all that has shaped the functional approach to religion. Durkheim's early work was concerned with explaining how societies held together. His answer was that all institutions, including religion, had social functions. For example, paradoxically, even crime has a function in society, by reminding persons of the boundaries of acceptable behavior and of the sanctions for crossing these boundaries. Durkheim famously made the distinction between pre-modern mechanical solidarity and modern organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity, which is found in tribal societies, social action is based on rigid rules and traditions. The role of religion is to legitimate the social order. In organic solidarity, which is found in modern, industrialized societies, the functions of institutions are differentiated. For example, churches lose their monopoly over education and moral guidance, hence diminishing their social influence.

If in his early work Durkheim still operated with a rather conventional view of religion, his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) marked a significant break from earlier approaches. Focusing on what in his day was considered to be the earliest extant manifestation of religion, Australian aboriginal totemism, Durkheim concluded that religion, stripped from the historical baggage of the "world religions," is fundamentally about persons coming together to affirm and maintain that which is larger than any individual and that provides the community with order: society itself. Yet against Marxian and Freudian interpretations of religion, Durkheim insisted that religion is not an illusion: "The faithful are not mistaken when they believe in the moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves. This power exists, and it is society" (Durkheim 1995, 226–227). Religion, defined this way, becomes a key part of any society. It is the ritual re-enactment of solidarity within groups. Used functionally, in terms of what it does, the meaning of "religion" can thus

be – and has been – expanded to myriad phenomena. In a Durkheimian vein Robert Bellah (1967) famously argued that national symbols such as flags and holidays constitute “civil religion.” This approach to “religion” has since been applied to sports, popular music fandom, and political ideologies (“political religion”).

Functional approaches have been called, with justification, “more radically sociological” (Berger 1967, 176) than substantive approaches. They tend to reduce religion to social interaction, denying religion an independent role beyond the function it serves for social cohesion. Therefore it is somewhat ironic that in recent decades functional approaches have undergone a renaissance in the sociology of religion. Ironic, because this has happened much as a counter reaction to the dominance of secularization theory (see below). As the decline of institutional religion in particular social contexts seems to be increasingly irrefutable, some sociologists of religion have started to focus on practices that provide persons with meaning. Although not applicable on the substantive scale of official belief, belonging, and vitality, these practices are nevertheless treated as “religion.” Therefore the practice of yoga might not register as “religion” in the sense of believing in Hindu myths as the background to yoga. But it would register as “religion” in the functional sense of providing a sense of connection with oneself, or some unnamed reality beyond the everyday. While functional approaches cover more phenomena than substantive approaches, which are often based on Protestant assumptions about what “religion” is, this broader focus is also a problem. It is easy to spot similarities between the behavior of church attendees and sports fans, but functional approaches are of little use in explaining the differences. Are communal prayers really the same thing as rock concerts? Is it helpful for understanding “religion” to equate the two?

The difference between substantive and functional definitions is considered in most textbooks on the sociology of religion. The third approach, which I call constructionist, is less common but equally important. Constructionist approaches ask *what passes for religion in society*. Instead of trying to come up with a definition of religion for the research questions and appropriate data, constructionist approaches concentrate on the act of definition itself. Thus the focus is on how persons construct the meaning of “religion” and on what the social consequences of these constructions are. The analytical term for this approach is *discourse*, or the ways in which we talk about “religion.”

A self-identifying discursive study of religion has emerged in recent years (see von Stuckrad 2010). It is by no means a unified field, however. The object of analysis can be on the practice of the sociology of religion itself (metatheoretical) or on the everyday ways in which persons talk about religion (empirical). Much of the metatheoretical work has been done in religious studies in an attempt to examine the explicit and hidden agendas of research, or the consequences of particular ways of defining religion in academia. The empirical analysis, by contrast, concentrates on the discourses in the media, in politics, and in everyday talk. Constructionist approaches also differ in whether they focus on the content or the context of the discourse.

Foregrounding context is characteristic of a sociological approach to discourse. That is, discourse does not do anything by itself. Only persons talking, writing, and discussing do. Context is sociologically important because discourse is meaningful

only in particular contexts. Further, the effectiveness of discourse is partly a function of its form of presentation but also partly a function of the social position of the speaker: what the Pope says is more likely to change Catholic practice than what a village priest says. Critical constructionist approaches (see Hjelm 2014) put these questions of power on center stage. Karl Marx (1818–1883) famously criticized religion for being a sedative that draws attention away from social problems such as class exploitation by positing a paradise in the afterlife. By doing so, religion legitimates the social order. Critical constructionist scholars examine how this process is accomplished through language. They also examine how religion drives social change in some contexts.

Despite his blasé attitude toward defining religion, Peter Berger offers a sociological definition that, by combining elements from all approaches to religion, also illustrates their differences: “[Religion is] the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos” (Berger 1967, 55).

Berger’s definition is *substantive* in that it differentiates between the sacred and the profane. Berger here draws from the tradition of classic *Religionswissenschaft*, as represented by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). But it is also *functional* in that it posits that religion provides order in a chaotic world, order at the highest possible level, the cosmic. The world is as it is because God, gods, or a cosmic law decrees it so. Finally, Berger’s definition makes clear that religion is a human *construction*.

Now, as a definition Berger’s is rather comprehensive, but in practice scholars inspired by his work have turned it into approaches that focus on one feature at the expense of others. In fact, Berger himself has veered toward a functional approach to religion in his later work. Yet scholarship on secularization inspired by Berger relies on a substantive definition. Ironically, although Berger is best known for popularizing the idea of social construction in sociology, the emergence of a constructionist sociology of religion is a relatively recent phenomenon. In sum, definitions matter, but less as exhaustive descriptions of phenomena subsumed under the term “religion” than as blueprints for conducting systematic research on religion.

Religion and Social Change

It would not be an exaggeration to say that sociology was born to tackle the problem of modernity. Although the word “modernity” has been used in many ways, it was the perceived rupture with the agricultural world that inspired Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, all of whom wrote in the midst of increasing industrialization, urbanization, and division of labor. “Modernity” was their term for a new and more complex era in Europe and North America. For Marx, the defining feature of modernity was class struggle. For Durkheim, it was the passage from mechanical to organic solidarity. For Weber, it was the increasing rationalization and bureaucratization of society. Durkheim and Weber noted how religion was transformed by modernity. Sociology of religion inherited this focus – some might say obsession – on religion and social change.

There are multiple ways of characterizing religious change. Building on James Spickard (2006), I have chosen five perspectives found in recent sociological debate: secularization; desecularization and post-secularity; supply-side theories of religion; individualization and spirituality; and globalization.

Secularization

One of the ironies of the sociology of religion is that for a long time its practitioners were more or less convinced that they were studying a subject that was bound to disappear. Consequently, no other topic has held as much sway in the discipline as secularization. Again, the roots of this view are to be discovered in the classics. For Marx, religion was bound to disappear in the coming communist society, where the opium-like soothing but ultimately futile power of religion would not be needed any more. For Durkheim, increasing social differentiation sounded the death knell for at least traditional religion. Weber noted how the Protestant tradition itself had accelerated the “disenchantment of the world.” By the 1960s these early ideas had coalesced into what we now know as “secularization theory,” or the “secularization thesis.”

In fact, “coalesce” might not be the best word, as there are several variations of secularization theory. What unites them is an understanding of secularization as the “decline in the social significance of religion” (Bruce 2011, 2). Steve Bruce, among others, adds that the structural differentiation of social institutions and the decreasing number of religious persons and the decreasing strength of individual beliefs are related: “As religious faith loses social power, it becomes harder for each generation to socialize its children in the faith. It also becomes progressively harder for those who remain religious to preserve the cohesion and integrity of their particular belief system” (Bruce 2011, 2).

Few sociologists doubt the reality of social differentiation. Differences arise over the question whether the loss by religion of social power necessarily leads to less and weaker religion. The most significant counterarguments claim that secularization theory, as envisaged by Bruce, who builds on Bryan Wilson and Berger, is extrapolated from Western Europe. However, global surveys, especially by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2011), confirm that insofar as European modernization means increased existential security – “the feeling that survival is secure enough that it can be taken for granted” (Bruce 2011, 4) – the social power of religion is on the wane. Recent generational changes in the United States, long considered the prime counterexample of secularization because of its advanced modernization yet high level of religiosity, have shown that the “nones” are increasing even there. The debate on secularization is far from settled, despite triumphant declarations to the contrary on each side.

Desecularization and post-secularity

To the surprise of many, one of these triumphant voices against secularization theory has been the same Berger. In his *Sacred Canopy* (1967) he still advocated a version it. But

the anthology *The Desecularization of the World*, edited by Berger (1999), provided the vocabulary (if fewer actual arguments) for a movement away from the hegemony of secularization theory. Berger and his collaborators' point was that, empirically speaking, the world was "as furiously religious as it ever was" and that secularization is a phenomenon that exists mainly in the minds of Western and Westernized academics.

"Desecularization," while capturing the *zeitgeist* in the sociology of religion, never quite caught on in serious analysis. There are two main reasons. First, the term logically presupposed that secularization had happened and was now being reversed, giving rise to many claims of a "return of religion." Yet no resurgence was evident in those places where secularization had supposedly happened. Second, the argument was about the global context, which had remained mostly religious. Continued vitality in some places does not, however, reverse the observation that if particular conditions are fulfilled, as in a country like Sweden, religion will likely decline. "Desecularization" can be a useful term for the fluctuation in the visibility or public presence of religion, but this term should not be confused with vitality.

More popular, yet more confusing, has been the newer term "post-secular," or "post-secularity." Gaining much of its traction from the fact that it was used by the eminent philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the post-secular is now a standard, if contested, concept in the sociology of religion. Habermas used the term to denote a change in public discourse, whereby religious views should be taken seriously in the public sphere. Habermas's view was a correction of his own earlier view that the public sphere should always be secular. The "post-secular" in this sense is a normative term. Some sociologists of religion have, however, used the form "post-secularity" descriptively for a state of things (see Beckford 2011). The point has been less to challenge the propositions of secularization theory than simply to state that religion has "returned" or else never went away in the first place. The problem, of course, is the same as that with "desecularization." In some places persons *are* increasingly secular and the social power of religion is on the wane, thus making claims of a "post-secular" age suspect.

When used in its original, "Habermasian" sense, "post-secular" has been a useful meta-term, which captures the change in the social scientific discourse. It would be an exaggeration to call the change a post-secular "turn," but at least the voices calling for the recognition of religion as a significant factor to take into account in our analyses are loud and clear. It remains to be seen how extensively they will be echoed in actual sociological practice. In a way, then, the post-secular in its normative sense has been less important for religious studies, where religion has obviously continued to be a central focus of interest.

Supply-side theories of religion

A seemingly more robust challenge to secularization has been the approach originally dubbed the rational choice theory of religion. Associated especially with the sociologist Rodney Stark, the approach argues that religion is just like any other commodity and that persons make informed choices about "salvation goods" in the religious marketplace.

In the United States, the advocates claim, churches that emphasize supernaturalism and strict adherence fare better than more liberal churches, which offer “goods” that are insufficiently different from secular alternatives. Rational choice theory is, then, more than a theory of religious change. It is a theory of religion itself (see Stark 1999).

In terms of religious change, the main point about approaches stemming from rational choice theory is that they focus on the supply of religious “goods,” hence the term “supply-side theory.” By contrast, classic secularization theory focuses on the declining demand for religion. According to the supply-side model, the more competition there is on the religious market, the more religious persons there are, because the market is able to cater to their particular religious needs. Europe fares worst because historical monopoly churches stifle competition. At bottom, the supply-side model is neo-classical (or neo-liberal) economic theory applied to religion.

In the 1990s supply-side arguments generated a lot of heat, some dubbing it the “new paradigm” in the sociology of religion (see Warner 1993). But in the thirty years since, the approach has garnered increasing criticism. Serious doubt is being cast on the idea of rational choice throughout the social sciences. For sociology, this narrow focus on individual action has always been problematic, but nowadays the rationality debate rages at the heart of economics as well. Further, although supply-side approaches claim universality, their successful application has so far been limited mostly to the United States. The mathematical models used to argue for supply-side theories have also been questioned. Many supply-side scholars have left the field of sociology, preferring to call their endeavor the “economics of religion” and organizing their own scholarly meetings and publishing in journals in economics rather than in sociology.

Individualization and spirituality

Individualization as a social process connected to modernization is an oft-shared premise in sociology. In the sociology of religion there have been significant consequences. The most important is the rise of “spirituality” as a key concept. Indeed, the “sociology of spirituality” has been offered as complementary or alternative to the sociology of religion (see Wood 2009). Spirituality, conceived this way, refers to practices and beliefs outside institutions. Although spirituality can be practiced in groups, it is at heart individualistic. Even in spiritual communities persons are free to choose their individual path within the broad traditions and practices of the community. Individually and communally, spirituality can refer to syncretism, where beliefs and practices from different traditions are combined, or to completely new expressions. Spirituality in this sense is inclusive, encompassing everything from the belief in angels to mindfulness and yoga.

Increasingly, especially in the United States, persons are self-identifying as “spiritual but not religious.” Some scholars have considered this another challenge to secularization theory, claiming that although traditional measures of religiosity – membership and belief – can be in decline, the balance has shifted to spirituality. Standard ways of studying religion do not, claim proponents of spiritualization, or “re-sacralization,” capture individualistic expressions of spirituality beyond organized religion. It is not a coincidence that many of these scholars favor a functional approach to the sociology of religion.

While individualization is largely accepted as a phenomenon characteristic of modernizing societies, doubts have been cast on whether spirituality poses an actual challenge to secularization theory. Secularization is largely a matter of failed socialization of the next generation into religion. The problem of any individualistic practice – spiritual or not – is that the transmission of the practice is unlikely when the whole point is that it is a personal choice and is individual in form. Then again, scholars like Nancy Ammerman (2013) problematize the strict separation of religion from spirituality, arguing that in practice these two overlap, thus complicating the picture of a smooth change from institutional religion to individualistic spirituality. While there is no doubt that “spirituality” has become an increasingly popular way of describing individualistic meaning-making, it remains to be seen whether spirituality or indifference better characterizes the changed role of religion in modernizing societies.

Globalization

Finally, globalization has changed the way in which persons understand religion, society, and the interplay between them. The term “globalization” became fashionable in the early 1990s with the explosion of electronic communication, although, as historians have reminded us, global processes go back several centuries. In religion, globalization has meant at least three things (see Spickard 2006, 24–25; Beyer 2006). First, there is the increased diversity of religion that is the consequence of increased global mobility. It is thus usually possible to find a mosque, a gurdwara, and a Buddhist meditation center in any large European or American city. Conversely, the same is the case for Christian churches in China and India, for example. Diversity in this sense also refers to knowledge about the variety of the world’s religious traditions. In the age of broadband one does not even need to experience a Hindu puja face to face because the rituals can be conducted online. Increased diversity, coupled with individualization, is also the source of religious and spiritual innovation, even if these innovations often remain short-lived.

Second, scholars have increasingly criticized the ways in which the concept of “religion” itself is a Eurocentric, Christian construction that was imposed on other practices and beliefs around the world during the era of Western colonialism. A mostly Protestant understanding of “religion” privileges belief and evaluates different traditions by how well they match the Protestant ideal.

Third, while critical scholarship now acknowledges these characteristics, continuous usage has created a feedback loop, where global practices are increasingly understood in the Protestant framework. For example, laws regulating religion are built upon the Western construction of public and private, even if this distinction does not fit the local context. Perhaps that is why there is sometimes a tendency to except one’s own tradition from the category of “religion,” as was the case with Shinto in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century (see Beyer 2006, 6–7).

After the near-monopolistic reign of secularization theory, the most significant development in the debate on religion and social change has been the acknowledgment that perhaps no single theory or model can explain or predict the direction of religion in

the modern world. Indeed, part of this argument is that instead of “religion” in the singular, a more apt approach would be discuss this question in narrower contexts, where fluctuations are explained by historical events and where analysis takes into account the various meanings that persons give to “religion” in the first place.

Current Directions

Sociological theorizing is influenced by local circumstances. For example, European and American sociology of religion has been going in different directions in recent decades, and neither has paid much attention to priorities in the global South. Nevertheless, some common themes have emerged. A sociology of religion relevant to the broader field of sociology would do well to pay attention to the following topics: public religion; mediatisation of religion; lived religion; non-religion; and religion and intersecting identities.

Public religion

The discussion about public religion grew out of a challenge to secularization theory. While not necessarily questioning the decline of levels of belief, some scholars rejected the idea that religion had been relegated to the private realm. They argued instead that “deprivatization,” the reemergence of religion in the public sphere, best characterizes the role of religion in modern societies (see Casanova 1994). There are indeed good grounds for claiming that religion is very much present in different spheres of society – politics, culture, and media – all around the world. But to argue that this fact is significant only in the context of debating secularization theory misses other significant processes that influence both religion and society.

Take the reorganization of religion–state relationships in the context of global capitalism. Religious communities are increasingly seen as “partners” in fulfilling some of the welfare functions that neo-liberal economic policy has been keen to cut from public provision. Churches, mosques, and synagogues provide homeless shelters, day care, elderly care, and food banks. There is a longer and more established tradition of this activity in places where public welfare provision has been historically low, such as in the United States, but the phenomenon has been increasing even in countries referred to as social democratic welfare regimes, such as the Nordic countries.

State funneling of funds to religious organizations may be a constitutional problem in some contexts. Communities that refuse to employ female staff for religious reasons, for example, may be denied state support because they are in violation of equality legislation. Conversely, where religious organizations are strong and the state weak, as in the case of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, the role of religion in the provision of welfare can lead to political splits.

Religion as a solution to social problems has been one visible form of public religion. The flip side of the issue is the way in which religion has simultaneously been constructed as a social problem in itself (see Hjelm 2011). This problem is most obvious in the case

of Islam in Europe and North America. Similar developments can be observed in China's crackdown on Muslims and Christians and in the demonization of indigenous practices by charismatic Christians in Africa.

Mediatization

Mediatization theory conceptualizes a qualitative change in the ways in which religion adjusts to media-dominated societies. In a nutshell, mediatization refers to a "process through which a variety of social fields become dependent on the media" (Hjarvard 2013, 24). For religion, this process is manifested in three ways. First, the media become the primary conduit through which knowledge about religion is disseminated. The effect of mediatization in this sense is, of course, dependent on the general level of religiosity and the autonomy of the media in specific contexts. Hence the mediatization effect is strongest in more secularized societies. For example, even a cursory look at British media shows that news stories about Jews overwhelmingly use pictures of Haredi Jews. This focus creates an image of a sequestered, conservative community, which in fact applies only to a small minority of British Jews. This dependence on controversial media images and discourses is even more evident in the case of Islam.

Second, as a consequence of mediatization, the relevance of religion in public debate is defined by the requirements of the media, not by religious communities themselves. Religion is increasingly represented as a problem because this kind of news attracts audiences. The Internet, social media, and cheaper access to broadcasting have enabled religious communities to produce their own media messages, of course, but even these need to adjust to the requirements of media technologies and genres. Finally, the secular logic of the media does not necessarily mean that mediatization has a secularizing effect (see Lövheim 2011). Instead, the ever deepening penetration of media in our everyday lives creates alternatives to religion. Not only do TV and video games compete with the time available for religious practice, but they also provide new sources for the building of competing world views, as the emergence of fan-based religions like Jediism and Harry Potter spirituality demonstrates.

Lived religion

Lived religion, a term that has found increased popularity in the sociology of religion since the 2000s, is a "sensitizing" concept. That is, it does not describe a new phenomenon, such as mediatization, but rather refocuses the sociological gaze toward existing practices. Popularized especially by Meredith McGuire, lived religion refers to "the actual experience of religious persons," as distinct from "the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (McGuire 2008, 12).

As the succinct definition suggests, the focus of lived religion approaches is on the individual instead of the community or congregation. Looking at the fuzzy ways in

which individuals negotiate multiple religious identities, lived religion approaches claim to capture the complexity of religious lives, as opposed to neat sociological categorizations. In this sense lived religion is also a methodological attempt to broaden the ways in which the sociology of religion understands its subject matter. As a corollary, the focus of inquiry in lived religion is on the embodied practice of everyday religion, as opposed to a more cognitive focus on “belief,” which is a legacy of the Protestant origin of the study of religion. Further, lived religion approaches have highlighted the gendered nature of religious practice. Everyday religion manifests itself in contexts of care, for example.

Non-religion

Another sensitizing concept currently in vogue in the sociology of religion is “non-religion.” The suggestion to use non-religion in lieu of “atheism” or “secularity” is made by Lois Lee (2012), one of the key figures in non-religion studies. She argues that instead of an absence of god (atheism) or absence of religion (secularity), non-religion denotes a substance of practices and beliefs, which are “primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion” (Lee 2012, 131). Atheism and secularity do not exhaust the field.

But “non-religion” is more. It is about fixing our sociological gazes toward the actual practices and beliefs of what has been sometimes dubbed the world’s third largest religion: the non-religious. For a long time the non-religious were an important variable for sociologists of religion, especially for scholars of secularization. But there was little interest in how exactly that *difference* from religion featured in non-religious lives. For example, the research on non-religion has demonstrated that the commonly held assumption in the United States that morality is dependent on religion is simply false. The sociology of religion has come full circle to including also non-religious and non-spiritual world views within its remit, as some of even the early figures in the discipline suggested.

Intersectionality

Finally, religion is increasingly discussed in conjunction with other social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and class. Survey research has, of course, discussed the interaction of these categories with religion for a long time, but the question of identities is about acknowledging that our social position influences how we see the world and that the sociology of religion has often been blind to many of these perspectives. For example, for much of the history of the discipline “religion” has referred to men’s religion. Instead we must consider the experiences of historically marginalized groups. Sociology of religion owes much to critical feminism, race theory, LGBTQI+ studies, and neo-Marxist approaches.

But a focus on identity and positionality is insufficient, as the newest openings in the discussion argue (see Singh 2015). Instead of comparing religious identity with, say, gender identity, we need to acknowledge the complexity of intersecting identities.

Indeed, this is what *intersectionality* means (see Crenshaw 1989). We can start by acknowledging that the experience of religion is different for men and women. But it is also different for white women and black women, for black middle-class women and black working-class women, for black heterosexual working class-women and black lesbian working-class women, and so on. Understanding how these different identities affect religion and how religion affects these other identities is crucial.

Doing Sociology of Religion

In this last section I want to discuss how sociology of religion is actually done. I have divided this discussion into two: an examination of different *methodological* approaches and of different *styles* of doing sociology of religion.

The sociology of religion is no different from the broader sociological endeavor. All kinds of social scientific methods have been used to study religion. Instead of the traditional quantitative versus qualitative distinction, I think it is more useful to write of three different approaches: quantitative research, the study of text and talk, and ethnography. A fourth approach, experimental research, fits sociological research less well because of the explicit sociological aim to observe people in their everyday lives instead of controlled environments.

For a long time, especially in the United States, sociology was almost exclusively a quantitative affair, using register data and surveys to examine correlations and possible causes. This legacy is still apparent on the pages of major American journals, such as *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Sociology of Religion*, which mostly publish quantitative research reports. In European sociology of religion the emphasis has been the opposite, prompting British sociologist Steve Bruce (2018) to lament the current inability or unwillingness of many sociologists of religion to engage with numbers. What is clear is the divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches to issues such as religious change.

The study of text and talk focuses on the meanings that persons give to whatever passes for religion in particular contexts. Speaking from the American experience, Robert Wuthnow (2011) has exhorted sociologists of religion to take these approaches more seriously. I say “text and talk” because there are two kinds of data available. First, there are “naturally occurring” texts produced by religious communities, media discourse on religion, and so on. Second, there is researcher-produced talk in the form of interviews, focus groups, and so on. The last forty years have produced an ever expanding array of methods for analyzing this textual data, including narrative analysis, discourse analysis, and conversation analysis. Increasingly, organization of textual data is conducted with computers, although so far programs cannot do the interpretive work for humans. Computerized methods, such as text mining, also blur the boundary between qualitative and quantitative methods, since both counting and interpretation are applied.

Finally, ethnography is the umbrella term for an approach that relies on observing human interaction in its “natural” environment, whether village life in Mozambique or

workplace practices in Manchester. Ethnography also refers to a style of writing about research, where the role of the researcher in the research process is reflexively acknowledged. Where the study of texts was originally associated with the humanist study of religion (“religious studies” or “comparative religion”), the disciplinary home of ethnography was anthropology. Both textual and ethnographic methods have, however, been appropriated by sociologists in recent years, as the dominance of quantitative methods has given way to methodological pluralism in the discipline (see Spickard and Landres 2002). Like textual scholars, ethnographers are interested not in producing law-like generalizations in the fashion of quantitative scholars but rather in examining the meanings that persons give to “religion” in their everyday lives. Unlike textual scholars, ethnographers are interested less in what persons say religion means than in how these meanings are manifested in interactions with others.

Methodologically, the sociology of religion is at its best when it takes into account results from all three approaches. In addition to methodological contours, different *styles* of doing sociology of religion count. By style I mean different attitudes to the subject matter of religion. Mine is a subjective typology, but it may be helpful in decoding the diversity of the field. I have identified four styles: religious, ecclesiastical, analytical, and critical.

James Spickard puts it well when he writes that “[t]he sociology of religion has lagged behind other fields in the ways we think about how we generate knowledge. . . . [W]e, with few exceptions, rehash the thirty-year-old debate about objectivity versus subjectivity – and do so in relatively naïve terms” (Spickard 2012, 1). My purpose in calling the first “style” *religious* sociology of religion is not to restart the old debate. The point is not whether religious scholars can produce objective knowledge. Rather, it is that even when the data, methods, and procedures are valid, reliable, and relevant, the result always ends up endorsing a view that religion is universal and functionally necessary – as the source of morals, for example. Lori Beaman has aptly called this view the “will to religion”: in terms of imagined universal criteria that are largely based in Christian understandings of religion: “The will to religion, then, is the idea that we are all religious, that we all have spiritual needs. . . . These spiritual needs are assessed” (Beaman 2013, 145). The exhortations among sociologists of religion to “take religion seriously” often rely on this kind of universal religion framework, although it is mostly implicit.

The second style of doing sociology of religion I call *ecclesiastical*. This is the style of sociology that Berger and Thomas Luckmann decried already almost sixty years ago: “The focus of interest is church-affiliated religiosity, its presence or absence, constituting respectively a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ situation from the management point of view” (Berger and Luckmann 1963, 419). As with the religious kind, the point is not objectivity as such but the same teleological tendency. Yet instead of universal and functionally required religion, ecclesiastical sociology of religion ends up arguing that the social institutions where religion is manifested are indispensable or at the least beneficial to a properly functioning society. The task of sociology of religion is, for this style, not only to “take religion seriously” but also to *appreciate* the work that churches and other

religious institutions and communities do. The ecclesiastical style is perhaps clearest in Europe, where old state churches struggle for social relevance in the face of increasing indifference. It is also a good example of the increasingly (and paradoxically) secular ways in which individual sociologists and church-affiliated research centers defend the role of religion and religious institutions in modern society (see Hjelm 2015).

Third, and occupying the largest swathe of territory in the field, is what I call *analytical* sociology of religion. The term is a misnomer in that all sociology worth its name is analytical. The term works, however, to highlight the Weberian aspiration to value-free science and the tendency to view incremental empirical work as the gold standard. Unlike the other three styles, analytical approaches generally refrain from making judgments about the implications of their results. Methodological accuracy and robustness may be considered the measure of objectivity in analytical approaches, making them lean toward quantitative methods, although by no means exclusively.

Most research in the sociology of religion stems from either the Weberian or the Durkheimian tradition. The impact of Marxist or more broadly *critical* approaches has been far smaller (see Hjelm 2014). There is hostility and indifference toward Marxist sociology in the study of religion, as there is hostility and indifference toward the study of religion in Marxist sociology. Although barely visible in textbook treatments of the field, critical approaches in the sociology of religion have experienced a minor surge in recent years, possibly as part of a broader renewed interest in tackling rampant social inequalities. Critical sociology of religion puts power at the center of inquiry. The focus is on how religion is used to legitimate inequalities and on how religious inequality is itself justified, for example. Presupposed is an applied ethics because critique cannot be conducted from a neutral position. That is why critical sociology of religion does not stop at analytical findings but points out how the analyzed beliefs and practices affect social inequalities. Further, it aims at concrete social change. This aspect puts it at odds with the value-free aspirations of analytical styles.

The sociology of religion is, then, diverse in methods and in “styles.” As in all other fields, sometimes there are calls for a single “correct” way of studying religion sociologically. But in fact, different questions require different approaches. Because there are no “correct” questions, the sociology of religion remains a pluralistic endeavor. The challenge for the sociology of religion is to reconnect with the broader field of sociology and of other social sciences. In a time of rapid climate change, another challenge is to confront the anthropocentrism of the sociological tradition and increasingly take into account the interplay between nature and religion. The future looks hopeful in this sense, as interdisciplinarity is increasingly embraced in the sociological study of religion.

Bibliography

- Ammerman, Nancy. 2013. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1990. *Thinking Sociologically*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Beaman, Lori. 2013. "The Will to Religion: Obligatory Religious Citizenship." *Critical Research in Religion* 1 (2): 141–157.
- Bellah, Robert N. 1967. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96 (1): 1–21.
- Berger, Peter L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Berger, Peter L. 1974. "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (2): 125–133.
- Berger, Peter L. 2014. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1963. "Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge." *Sociology and Social Research* 47 (4): 417–427.
- Beyer, Peter. 2006. *Religions in Global Society*. London: Routledge.
- Bruce, Steve. 2011. *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bruce, Steve. 2018. *Researching Religion: Why We Need Social Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139: 139–168.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1995 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Hjarvard, Stig. 2013. "Three Forms of Mediatized Religion: Changing the Public Face of Religion." In *Mediatization and Religion: Nordic Perspectives*, edited by Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lövheim, 21–44. Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Hjelm, Titus. 2011. "Religion and Social Problems: Three Perspectives." In *Religion and Social Problems*, edited by Titus Hjelm, 1–11. New York: Routledge.
- Hjelm, Titus. 2014. "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion." *Critical Sociology* 40 (6): 855–872.
- Hjelm, Titus. 2015. "Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion." In *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion*, edited by Titus Hjelm, 1–16. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Lee, Lois. 2012. "Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (1): 129–139.
- Lövheim, Mia. 2011. "Mediatization of Religion: A Critical Appraisal." *Culture and Religion* 12 (2): 153–166.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. 2011. *The Sacred and the Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Second edition (first edition 2004). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Singh, Jakeet. 2015. "Religious Agency and the Limits of Intersectionality." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 30 (4): 657–674.
- Spickard, James V. 2012. "Faith, Hope, and Regulative Ideals: Epistemological Reflexivity in the Sociology of Religion." *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion* 3: 1–23.
- Spickard, James V., and J. Shawn Landres. 2002. "Introduction: Whither Ethnography? Transforming the Social-Scientific Study of Religion." In *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, edited by James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire, 1–14. New York: New York University Press.

- Stark, Rodney. 1999 "Micro Foundations of Religion: A Revised Theory." *Sociological Theory* 17 (3): 264–289.
- Von Stuckrad, Kocku. 2010. "Reflections on the Limits of Reflection: An Invitation to the Discursive Study of Religion." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2/3): 156–169.
- Weber, Max. 2001 [1904–1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge.
- Wood, Matthew. 2009. "The Nonformative Elements of Religious Life: Questioning the 'Sociology of Spirituality' Paradigm." *Social Compass* 59 (2): 237–248.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2011. "Taking Talk Seriously: Religious Discourse as Social Practice." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (1): 1–21.

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion

Second Edition

Edited by

Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas

WILEY Blackwell

This second edition first published 2021
© 2021 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

Edition History
Blackwell Publishing Ltd (1e, 2006)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by law. Advice on how to obtain permission to reuse material from this title is available at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

The right of Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas to be identified as the authors of the editorial material in this work has been asserted in accordance with law.

Registered Offices
John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Office
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, customer services, and more information about Wiley products visit us at www.wiley.com.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty

While the publisher and authors have used their best efforts in preparing this work, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties, including without limitation any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives, written sales materials or promotional statements for this work. The fact that an organization, website, or product is referred to in this work as a citation and/or potential source of further information does not mean that the publisher and authors endorse the information or services the organization, website, or product may provide or recommendations it may make. This work is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a specialist where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Segal, Robert Alan, editor. | Roubekas, Nickolas P. (Nickolas Panayiotis), 1979– editor.
Title: The Wiley Blackwell companion to the study of religion / edited by Robert A. Segal and Nickolas P. Roubekas.
Description: Second edition. | Hoboken, NJ : Wiley-Blackwell, 2021. | Series: Wiley Blackwell companions to religion | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020036469 (print) | LCCN 2020036470 (ebook) | ISBN 9780470656563 (cloth) | ISBN 9781119092780 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119092766 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Religion. | Religion–Study and teaching. | Religion–Research.
Classification: LCC BL48 .W486 2021 (print) | LCC BL48 (ebook) | DDC 200.7–dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020036469>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020036470>

Cover Design: Wiley
Cover Image: © Rakdee/DigitalVision Vectors/Getty Images

Set in 10/12.5pt Photina by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India