

Introduction

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Discussion of religion seems to be everywhere in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Television documentaries, newspaper stories, magazine articles, online user groups, blogs, cartoons and websites all compete to offer the latest story about religion. Sensationalist accounts of violence and exploitation associated with religion tend to dominate. It has become a cliché to claim that religion must be taken seriously because of its association with extremism, terrorism, violence and doomsday scenarios. This is how many journalists and programme makers see it. They also have a tendency to focus on the growing popularity of various forms of conservative religiosity around the world. This is fine – as far as it goes – and fully understandable. But the narrow focus on these sensational, headline-touted and eye-catching phenomena fails to do justice to the richness and diversity of other facets and developments of religion. It also conceals the trajectory of intellectual development in the sociological study of religion. A more inclusive and even-handed approach to the sociology of religion is, therefore, our aim. Without overlooking religious violence and the spread of conservatism, this Handbook will also delve into religion's relationship with such things as politics, community development, healthcare, education and personal experiences through the life cycle.

Long-standing expectations that religion would merely wither away as modernisation progressed have proven simplistic. Religion has become more complicated, newsworthy, contentious and problematic. And if there is any consensus to be had on religion, it is that there is a lot of religion around. Indeed, many pundits are surprised that religion has such high visibility in the twenty-first century. Many sociologists have come to realise that it makes no sense now to omit religion from the repertoire of social scientific explanations of social life. On the contrary, it has become increasingly essential to have a clear sociological understanding of the ways in which religion operates as one of the many forces shaping – and being shaped by – our increasingly globalised – and globally conflicted – world.

The reasons for wanting to study the sociological aspects of religion are diverse in the extreme. Interest may arise from curiosity about the workings of religious organisations or religious movements. Equally, interest may centre on questions about religious motivation, experiences or emotions. There may be concern with the economic, political or moral implications of religious beliefs and values. And the conflicts and intertwining of religions, cultures and civilisations lends itself well to sociological investigation. In other words, the reasons for wanting to understand the sociology

of religion know no limits. They cover the entire range from personal curiosity to a concern for national security or peace and justice in the world.

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION

If the need for a sociological understanding of religion has rarely been greater, just what is distinctive about such an understanding? Five characteristics loom large. First, a sociological approach is partly distinguished by what it is not. Of course, some people consider religion to be eternal truth, divinely inspired law or unquestionable values as ordained by gods or spirits. But sociology does not provide ultimate answers to ultimate questions. The sociological agenda does not involve evaluations of particular faiths and convictions, nor does it assess the transcendental postulates on which they are based. Given the vicissitudes of religious dynamics, sociology offers more paradoxology than doxology.

Second, as this Handbook will amply demonstrate, there are many different sociological approaches. Nevertheless, they all focus on the social dimensions of religion and the religious dimensions of the social. The sociology of religion is not restricted to understanding churches, sects, cults, temples and mosques – though this is one part of its challenge. It also has a mandate to seek out the myriad ways in which religion at various levels affects the seemingly non-religious aspects of social life. Religion is social because it finds expression in and shapes social relationships and processes that range from the micro-world of the individual to the macro-world of whole societies. Religion is also social in that it both involves and influences the communication of meanings through ideas, images, rituals, emotions, texts, styles of self-presentation, gestures, music, song, dance and so on. From a sociological perspective, there are few more misleading conceptions of religion than George Santayana's remark that 'Religion is what man does in his own solitariness'. Even when practised alone, religion is rooted in the social.

Third, sociological perspectives on religion embrace the widely differing meanings attributed to the term 'religion'. Dictionaries typically define religion as 'beliefs and practices relative to deities, spirits or other superhuman powers'. This type of definition is certainly close to the commonsense meaning of the term, but it is too narrow for sociological purposes. For example, it does not refer to aspects of religion such as emotions, experiences, groups or organisations. Nor does it include beliefs and practices that can be considered religious in spite of the fact that they have no place for deities, spirits or other superhuman powers. What is needed, then, is an approach that recognises that the meaning of 'religion' is itself varied, changing and subject to social influences. Instead of relying on a definition that more or less arbitrarily includes only some defining characteristics of religion and excludes others, a better approach is to regard the definition of religion as an open-ended, often contested and on-going social process. There is argument and disagreement about what counts as religion in everyday life, and this is a topic for sociological investigation in its own right. It goes almost without saying that public opinion about the value of religion also ranges widely between utter condemnation and enthusiastic embrace.

Fourth, sociological approaches to religion utilise research methods that are as diverse as religion itself. Religion can have social, cultural, historical, political, economic, moral, psychological, aesthetic, philosophical, linguistic and legal dimensions – and some would add genetic and neurophysiological to the list. Consequently, research techniques and strategies need to be properly attuned to the particular dimension at issue. There is certainly no single 'sociological method' for the study of religion. It is more a question of being sensitive to the complex interweaving of religion with other aspects of social or cultural life and of selecting appropriate methods for studying it. Sociological approaches are also frequently involved in interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary investigations approaches required by religion's multi-faceted phenomena.

Fifth, the sociology of religion both borrows from and contributes to other fields of sociology. Many of its insights come from scholars who were not personally religious – for example, the great triumvirate of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Much of its conceptual and methodological core reflects broader inquiries into non-religious cultures, organisations, patterns of inequality, and questions of self and identity. At the same time, sociology as a whole has benefited considerably from scholarship on religion. Again the aforementioned triumvirate offers a case in point, as we shall see. Sociology's understandings of social change, of power and authority, of social movements and of institutional commitment have all been influenced by research on religion. In some sense, religion is only one part of the wider sphere of what can be sacred to individuals and society.

THE INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

The development of sociological thinking about religion has undergone many changes since the late nineteenth century. Some ideas have run into the sand; others have declined in popularity but revived at a later date; and there has been a continuing percolation of new ideas. There is both continuity and creativity. And, with the passing of time, the diversity of approaches has increased both within and between the various linguistic communities in which sociologists of religion publish their writings, the largest of which being English by far. The sociology of religion began in close proximity to the work of other social scientists, especially social anthropologists and political economists. It subsequently drifted away from the central concerns of social science before starting to align itself with them once more. The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed an increasingly creative and mutual engagement between sociologists of religion and intellectual developments in other fields of sociology as well as with other social sciences. As a result, sociological interest in religion has

now returned to a position close to the centre of intellectual curiosity about the forces shaping socio-cultural life in the early twenty-first century. Elsewhere, one of us has characterised this trajectory in terms of Sir Thomas Beecham's encouragement to orchestras to 'start together and finish together' (Beckford 2000: 481–82).

This is not the place for a detailed history of the sociology of religion (see O'Toole 1984; Beckford 1989, 1990; Willaime 1999; Davie 2003), but shifts in the assumptions underlying sociologists' attempts to make sense of religion are an important part of the context for the chapters that follow. Indeed, numerous contributors pay tribute to the influence that the founding generation of thinkers exercised on sociological ways of understanding religion in the transition from traditional to modern forms of society. And Randall Collins (in this volume) pays particularly careful attention to the pioneering work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. But it is equally important to realise that their core work was less preoccupied with religion in its own terms than with understanding the broader set of societal dynamics involving modernisation, rationalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation. As a result, the emergence of sociological approaches to religion was inseparable from the consolidation of sociology as a form of methodical investigation of societal continuity and change. And by the middle of the twentieth century, religion had moved even further to the periphery of sociology.

This loss of centrality was associated with three factors. First, many social scientists perceived religion itself as marginal to society, and this was especially the case with modernising society. Second, the dominant school of functionalism tended to relegate religion to the status of a purely conservative or stabilising force in society. Third, sociologists of religion paradoxically de-centred themselves by creating their own problematics and institutions that were poorly articulated with the social science mainstream – for example, their enduring fascination with elaborating the church-sect distinction of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch. For all of these reasons, the sociology of

religion became relatively isolated from, and insulated against, the issues and ideas that interested most social scientists (Beckford 1985a). Again in Sir Thomas Beecham's terms, it was not playing in time with the majority of the sociological orchestra.

But in the 1960s, a series of developments intimated the eventual re-synchronisation of the sociology of religion. One major factor was the move away from functionalism in the sociology of religion, beginning with the separate and joint writings of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Their *Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann 1966) marked the beginning of an intellectual turn away from questions of systems and functions towards a concern with the social processes that engender experience, knowledge, culture and language. The application of this 'sociology of knowledge' approach to religion had already inspired the German edition of Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* in 1963 and was to underlie Berger's path-breaking *The Social Canopy* in 1967. In their different ways, Berger and Luckmann represented not only continuity with the themes of the 'classics' but also – and more importantly – a departure from the practice of confining the sociology of religion to the study of formal religious organisations such as churches, denominations and sects as exemplified by Charles Glock and his student, Rodney Stark and by Robert Wuthnow at the University of California, Berkeley. It was there too that Robert Bellah elaborated the Durkheimian notion of a national 'civil religion'.

In general, however, the sociology of religion was relatively slow to follow sociology's 'cultural turn'. In fact, the field's resurgence following the 1960s was due in no small measure to a turning away from religion writ large as a national and societal phenomenon to religion writ small at the level of new movements and new social psychological dynamics. While few were exploring the potential merits of ethnomethodology, the notion of 'framing' or the musical and visual registers of religious activities (but see Morgan 1998), a number started to apply insights from symbolic interactionism to the understanding of the processes whereby meaning and identity could be generated in

settings such as revival meetings, prayer groups, faith healing activities, and particularly the rapidly growing visibility of controversial new religious movements in the 1980s. The melding of insights from the sociology of knowledge and symbolic interactionism (Neitz 1990) transformed our understanding of, for example, 'active' conversion (Richardson 1985), healing in religious settings (McGuire 1988), 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1990) and religious experience (Neitz and Spickard 1990).

Meanwhile, Marxist ideas continued to influence only a few sociologists of religion in advanced industrial societies. They studied the capacity of religion to comfort the oppressed, to stimulate rebellion against exploitation or to provide ideological justification for the most powerful social classes in society. In spite of extensive theoretical discussion, empirical investigation and historical inquiry, however, few Marxists showed interest in religion as a sociological phenomenon. And even fewer mainstream sociologists of religion integrated Marxist perspectives into their research (but see Maduro 1982). Not even the quasi-Marxist Critical Theory – with its mixture of humanistic Marxism, psychoanalysis and cultural theory – made much of an impact on the sociology of religion. Nor did the fashion for Liberation Theology or theologies of struggle lead to many fresh initiatives in the sociology of religion except in some specialised studies of countries in Latin American and South East Asia (but see Smith 1991). Again, the sociology of religion's marginality to currents of Marxism demonstrated its remove from ideas that were, at least temporarily, dominant among other sociologists.

Although most sociologists of religion resisted Marxist notions of religion as opiate and false consciousness, many were interested in religion's intersection with social class and other forms of inequality. This makes it all the more surprising, then, that one of the major factors shaping the intellectual trajectory of the sociology of religion in the final three decades of the twentieth century was the unexpected outburst of so-called new religious movements (NRMs). The movements that attracted most sociological interest at the time

included the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Children of God. Unlike predecessors such as the Salvation Army or the first wave of Pentecostalism, members of the NRMs that achieved high visibility and notoriety, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, did not come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is one of the reasons why Marxist perspectives appeared to offer very little purchase on NRMs. In fact, the movements tended to recruit relatively young, well educated people from middle class families. In this respect, NRMs were similar to 'new' social movements in the fields of feminism, peace, environmentalism and human rights (Hannigan 1993). Sociologists were therefore obliged to look for new explanations of the capacity of NRMs to mobilise followers and resources on a scale that alarmed their critics and provoked numerous controversies (Robbins and Lucas in this volume). Debate centred on a wide range of would-be explanations involving 'brainwashing', charismatic leaders, civil religion, identity theories, anomie, alienation and so on. More importantly, the rise of NRMs in the late twentieth century led sociologists of religion to examine the role of the mass media in framing controversies – and the response of police and politicians to 'cult controversies' (Beckford 1985b). And, in view of the transnational operations of the most controversial NRMs, it became important to understand how the response to them varied from country to country.

Studies of NRMs also brought new methodological techniques and issues to the sociology of religion. Because these small groups were generally only accessible to field research – and sometimes actual 'participant observation' – they prompted a surge of qualitative ethnography. But this led in turn to ethical issues about the social relations between sociologists and the movements they were studying, especially as some of the movements were reluctant to be closely observed (Robbins *et al.* 1973; Barker 1983; Ayella 1993). Questions were raised about the challenge of studying religion in some of its controversial forms (Robbins 1983; Richardson 1991). The importance of accounting for the gendered aspects of NRMs was also

strongly emphasised (Jacobs 1991). And sociologists of religion found themselves facing the dilemma of whether to appear as expert witnesses in courts of law considering NRM-related cases (Wilson 1998; Hervieu-Léger 1999). Moreover, research on NRMs was a powerful vector for the introduction of broader concerns with religious liberty, the regulation of religion and the relation between human rights and religions (Shepherd 1982; Richardson 2004). The reverberations of all these methodological challenges continue to rattle through the sociology of religion, although the topic of NRMs is no longer so controversial in itself. In fact, by the beginning of the twenty-first century religion was more often controversial for reasons to do with violence, fraud and sexual abuse. But it was the confrontation between sociologists and NRMs that first placed religious controversies on the sociological agenda.

New developments in qualitative research methods have lent themselves well to the sociology of religion overall (Spickard *et al.* 2002) notably in relation to ethnographic, narrative, visual, discourse analytic, biographical and autobiographical forms of investigation (Spickard in this volume). And recent socio-historical studies of religion have demonstrated both the centrality of religion to a well-balanced understanding of historical change and the variety of increasingly self-reflexive methods that sociologists of religion are deploying in their analyses of religious change (Hall in this volume) and narratives of religion's place in the life-course (Hunt in this volume).

Studies of mainstream religious traditions and organisations have also become more ambitious and sophisticated in their use of research methods, often combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. This is certainly the case with large-scale investigations of parishes (Hornsby-Smith 1989), congregations (Roof and McKinney 1987; Ammerman 1997; Ammerman *et al.* 1998; Harris 1998; Becker 1999; Demerath and Farnsley in this volume), 'immigrant congregations' (Warner and Wittner 1997; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000), generations of believers (Roof 1993, 1999; Dillon in this volume), denominations (Ammerman 1990;

Chaves 1997) and religious organisations (Demerath *et al.* 1998). Growing methodological sophistication is also a hallmark of innovative studies of religion and charitable activities (Wuthnow 1991), the expanding scope of 'spirituality' (Wuthnow 2001), the changing character of clergy training and careers (Carroll *et al.* 1997; Nesbitt 1997, and in this volume) and the rising salience of 'special purpose groups' (Wuthnow 1998).

Very different methodological developments in the sociology of religion have been associated with increasingly sophisticated manipulation of quantitative data generated by large-scale surveys of beliefs, attitudes and opinion (Voas in this volume). In particular, the continuing expansion of the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, the European Values Survey, the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Programme and the Pew Global Attitudes Project has enabled sociologists of religion to chart continuity and change in quantitative indicators of religious belief over time and across a growing number of countries (for example Norris and Inglehart 2004; Bréchon in this volume).

All of these methodological advances helped in re-synchronising the sociology of religion with sociology as a whole. But similar theoretical advances also helped in the re-centring. Mainstream sociological theorising had responded to the various claims that modernity had advanced to a stage of 'late modernity', if not 'post-modernity' (Christiano in this volume). While relatively few sociologists of religion saw good reason to restructure their research in accordance with these claims, David Lyon (2000) made the most plausible case for arguing that religion in the early twenty-first century displayed some post-modern characteristics – albeit against a background in which the forces of modernity were still at work. Other theorists saw evidence of post-modernity in theological and philosophical concerns with the re-enchantment of the everyday world, with the resurgent interest in liturgies and with the apparent belief that New Age spiritualities were capitalising on the failure of modern rationality to go on enhancing the quality of human life in the absence of

supernatural ideals. Partly in connection with these developments, other sociologists have turned their attention to the embodied character of human experience – including religion – and to the neglected realm of embodied emotions (Mellor in this volume).

If the majority of sociologists of religion were less than enthusiastic about the usefulness of orienting their research towards the idea of a post-modern turn, it is nevertheless true that many theorists of the post-modern condition have seen fit to regard recent changes in religion as evidence in support of their general claims. Anthony Giddens (1991), for example, associates the growing popularity of conservative religious practices in late modernity with 'the return of the repressed'. Zygmunt Bauman (1992) also regards the search for moral and spiritual certainty as a sign that post-modern sensibilities have burst out of their modernist constraints. Elsewhere, the tendency is to highlight the exotic, playful or pastiche-like characteristics of aspects of religion in, for example, some New Age spiritualities or some hybridised forms of liturgy without taking proper account of their relative insignificance in the broader picture of religion. The closely related argument that New Age spiritualities epitomise consumerism, the logic of late capitalism and even the colonisation of the life-world is also a highly selective interpretation of complex and varied phenomena that defy simplistic categorisation (Bainbridge in this volume). Moreover, the focus on post-modern baubles or post-modern 'metatwaddle' (Gellner 1992: 41) runs the risk of obscuring our view of much more important phenomena such as the growing power of conservative evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, fundamentalism and religious nationalism – as well as the changing but persistent intertwining of religion with ethnicity and 'race' (Kivisto in this volume). It is questionable whether these phenomena can be most usefully understood as post-modern.

An emerging alternative – with special relevance to the study of religion – is to characterise the contemporary era as 'ultramodernity' (Willaime 2006). This term means that the forces of modernity not only continue to

operate but also become more radical. The modernising dynamic of secularisation, for example, has allegedly entered a new phase in which its implications are themselves radicalised. As a result, so the argument goes, politicians and policy makers increasingly turn to religion as a cultural resource to replace the out-moded modernist notion that social or political problems can simply be 'managed' by secular, rational methods. Another way to put this is to call it the re-ethicisation of aspects of social life that were supposed – in the modernist model – to have become the preserve of rational calculation alone. Religion is therefore believed to have retained or regained a role as a powerful source of moral values and visions (Bartkowski in this volume) as well as of personal and collective identities (Greil and Davidman in this volume) especially in relation to political power (Demerath and Williams 1992; Demerath 2001), faith-based initiatives (Farnsley in this volume), political attitudes and actions (Olson in this volume), civil religion (Cristi and Dawson in this volume) and political protest (Nepstad and Williams in this volume). Religion is also achieving recognition as an integral part of the nexus of relations between states, violence and human rights (Demerath in this volume).

Some currents of feminist thought have also helped to rescue religion from the irrelevance to which many notions of modernity had consigned it (Woodhead in this volume). On the one hand, feminist scholars have clearly documented the gendered distribution of authority and power in religious traditions and organisations (Wallace 1996). Others have investigated the contribution made by religions towards the identification and self-identification of women as dependent on, or subservient to, men. Evidence is plentiful of the exclusion, marginalisation, oppression and abuse of women in some religious settings. Sociological studies of religion have therefore been an integral part of the wider study of discrimination against women – crisscrossed in places by discrimination based on ethnicity, 'race' and social class.

On the other hand, sociological studies have also explored the capacity of women to transform religious ideas, rituals, roles, groups and

organisations into tools of sociability, empowerment and liberation. Whether it be women in religious orders (Wittberg 2006), new religious movements (Jacobs 1991), Catholic parishes (Wallace 1992) or goddess groupings (Griffin 2000), research has brought to light their actual or potential capacity to produce the changes in personal, social and cultural life for which they strive in the name of their different religious commitments.

At the same time, religious phenomena have presented feminist scholars with some formidable challenges. For example, the clear-sighted decision of some women to commit themselves to religiously inspired ways of living that necessarily subject them to the authority of men requires special consideration (Davidman 1991). Another challenge is to understand the controversies that surround Muslim women in the West who adopt forms of self-presentation and dress in public that clearly separate them from the majority. Still one more conundrum involves the difficulties facing women who do – or do not – take action against the abuse that they receive in religious groups from male leaders (Nason-Clark 2001). In short, religion is a 'site' on which some of the most hotly contested debates about gender in theory and practice are located.

Since the mid-1980s, it has also become clear that religion presents major challenges and opportunities to social scientific explorations of globalisation and, especially, of 'glocalisation' – or the tendency for global imports to take on local forms and functions (Robertson 1992; Beckford 2003: 103–49; Beyer in this volume). Starting from the perception that the world is increasingly experienced as a smaller place as a result of changes in the volume, intensity and speed of communications and movement across national boundaries, sociological analysis has thrown light on religion's contributions to global forces as well as on their impact on religion. The main challenge has been to explain how systems of belief and practice – such as 'world religions' – that claim universal truth and validity can be successfully adapted to, and melded with, diverse local circumstances. At the same time, 'local' faith traditions increasingly foster claims to

universal applicability. The dynamic mutual implication between the local and the global is as clearly evident in the realm of religion as in any other sphere of culture or society. Syncretistic and hybrid forms of religion have therefore proliferated in many parts of the world with the aid of global communications media such as the Internet and satellite broadcasting (Bunt 2003; Cowan in this volume). The missionary outreach of mainstream forms of religion has also benefited from the new information technologies, thereby aiding the spread of, for example, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam into relatively new mission territories (Coward *et al.* 2000). Fundamentalisms and conservative evangelical Christian churches (Freston in this volume) are undoubtedly benefiting from glocalisation, but it is a mistake to underestimate the extent to which some liberal, sectarian, pagan and New Age expressions of religion or spirituality can now take advantage of the new global opportunities.

But for all the loose talk and tight scholarship concerning globalisation today, there is an opposite topic to which the sociology of religion has been slower to respond. If the spread of globalisation mistakenly implies the spread of a syncretic consensus, the rise of nationalism more realistically entails conflict and potential violence both within and between the great faith traditions (Demerath 2001, and in this volume). We noted above the sociology of religion's resurgence some twenty-five years ago when it moved from the macro to the micro. Perhaps now is the time for yet another leap forward with a return to the macro and the specifically world of national and cross-national politics.

Meanwhile, another recent development in the sociology of religion is more epistemological and involves the arrival on the scholarly scene of the economics of religion. From this perspective, religious behaviour is best understood in terms of rational choice or 'subjective rationality' (Stark and Finke 2000). As Frank Lechner (in this volume) and others have shown, this is not a new perspective, but, in parallel with thinking about the rational foundations of economic and political conduct, a growing number of sociologists have argued

that explanations of religion should assume that its practitioners act rationally in the sense of basing their actions on calculated choices. This assumption rests largely on an instrumental notion of rationality, which 'assumes the presence of subjective efforts to weigh the anticipated rewards against the anticipated costs, although these efforts usually are inexact and somewhat casual' (Stark and Finke 2000: 37).

Rational choice perspectives have given a new twist to some venerable topics in the sociology of religion. They have, for example, helped to call in question some long-standing ideas about the inevitability of secularisation as one of the master trends of modernity (Warner 1993). They have also provided theoretical underpinning for explanations of the relative popularity of conservative churches (Iannaccone 1994), for the expansion of sectarian organisations (Stark and Iannaccone 1997), for the diversity of sectarian and cultic phenomena (Bainbridge in this volume) and for revival and reform in the Catholic Church (Finke and Wittberg 2000; Wittberg in this volume). Rational choice perspectives have also led to new lines of research on topics as diverse as the historical demography of US churches (Finke and Stark 1992) and the reasons for the successful expansion of early Christianity in the Roman Empire (Stark 1996).

Nevertheless, the critical response to these theoretical perspectives has been mixed. Some critics have applauded the attempt to place the sociology of religion on a firm basis in propositional theory and thereby to challenge some taken-for-granted views. Others have welcomed the methodical efforts to 'translate' existing knowledge into theoretical terms that can be clearly specified and – in some cases – quantified. And there has been a general welcome for a style of research that brings the sociology of religion into line with research in other branches of the social sciences. By contrast, the psychological assumptions underlying the rational choice discourse of compensators and rewards have attracted strong criticism (Bruce 1999). The perspective's failure to take account of differential perceptions of costs and benefits at the level of actors and entire cultures is another accusation (Spickard 1998).

In addition, the logical distinction between ideal-type theorising and real-life situations is often blurred in rational choice perspectives (Beckford 2001).

The influence exercised by rational choice perspectives on some – primarily American – sociologists of religion is certainly evidence that they are once more increasingly talking the same language as many other social scientists. At the same time, it has become difficult to hold the middle ground between the zealous advocates of rational choice and its equally determined despisers. Rational choice perspectives are not only challenging but are also contentious – perhaps more so than in other fields where they have been deployed. This is another case in which the sociology of religion has become a zone of scholarship hosting some of the most timely and heated debates in the social sciences.

To round off this assessment of the intellectual trajectory described by the sociology of religion, we return to questions about the conceptualisation of religion and secularisation. This is because – for all the developments in sociological ways of thinking about the complex intersections between religion and other spheres of social and cultural life – it remains impossible to avoid or to resolve once and for all the questions about the meaning of the central terms in the sociology of religion. While this may appear to be frustrating, we want to suggest that it is actually a source of considerable inspiration and innovation. Studies of religion as a social phenomenon can never take anything for granted because their principal object of study can be understood in so many different ways. This amounts to a continuous challenge not only for sociologists of religion but also for other scholars who may be seeking to understand religion from other points of view.

The opening chapter by Randall Collins traces the origins of the most influential sets of theoretical ideas about the nature of religion as an object for sociological investigation. Marx, Engels, Nietzsche and Freud each reduced religion to an illusory artefact of ideological interests or psychological projection. Durkheim portrayed religion as a functional mechanism for generating the ritual, symbolic and moral

basis of social solidarity. And Max Weber's approach gave priority to religions as sources and vehicles of meanings and motivations that have shaped societal developments in crucial ways. Each of these theoretical perspectives makes assumptions about the meaning of the term 'religion': explicit in the case of Durkheim, but largely implicit in the other cases. Entire chains of sociological research on religion have descended from these assumptions but without ever settling their differences or resolving the question of definition once and for all. This high degree of variation in definitions is both a reflection of the 'real world's' widely differing understandings of religion and a sign of the sociology of religion's openness towards competing approaches.

As editors, we have chosen to showcase variations in the understanding of what religion means in sociological terms. Indeed, two of our own contributions emphasise the importance of understanding religion – as well as secularity – as the product of social and intellectual struggles to construct it in certain ways. Thus, Demerath's chapter on secularisation and sacralisation shows how the sociology of religion could benefit from framing its subject matter, first, in terms of an irregular oscillation between sacralisation and secularisation and, second, as a sub-set of culture. The effect is both to shift the focus away from the unproductive question of whether religion is in decline or not and, at the same time, to situate sacralisation and religion in the broader context of cultural change. Moreover, the chapter by Beckford and Richardson shows how the categorisation and definition of religion are subject to cultural, political and legal processes of regulation. The meanings attributed to religion in the 'real world' are therefore a matter of struggle, conflict and compromise (Beckford 1999) as well as intellectual genealogy (Asad 2003).

PLANNING AND PRODUCING THE HANDBOOK

This Handbook represents an effort to meet several key objectives. First, it began with our

attempt to lay out an unusually encompassing sense of the field conceptually and methodologically. Based on our knowledge of the developing literature in the field over the past half-century and more, we produced a template that covered the field as a whole while suggesting its major component parts and the sub-topics within those parts that deserved chapter treatment.

We had to be selective. We had to decide which topics were important enough to be included – and which ones could be reluctantly omitted. We were determined to provide a balanced set that fairly represented the core of the sociology of religion. At the same time, we resisted the temptation to favour quirky or sensational topics that were tangential to religion's overall social and cultural significance in the early twenty-first century. We had no illusions of providing a 360° coverage of the sociology of religion, or of confusing a Handbook with a wikipedia.

Of course, our most general aim was to guide readers through the most important issues in the sociology of religion. But how did we assess 'importance'? One criterion was whether we thought that a topic was a pre-requisite for grasping the sociological meaning of religion at virtually any place or time. This is the 'can-you-really-call-yourself-a-sociologist-of-religion-without-knowing-about-this-topic' consideration. Another criterion was whether a topic was central to generating interesting research on religion. In other words, the topic had to be fruitful as well as interesting. Yet another was whether a new topic – or a new angle on an old topic – presented a worthwhile challenge to the prevailing wisdom. Would it make experienced sociologists sit up and pay attention? Certainly it was important for us to include chapters on a range of methodological approaches to the sociology of religion, including the historical dimension of the discipline. Finally, we deliberately included chapters by non-Anglo-American authors and that dealt with religion outside North America and Western Europe; and we encouraged all authors to make cross-national comparisons, where appropriate. This makes our Handbook virtually unique.

We then embarked upon the critical process of seeking experts for each of the chapter topics and asking them to take on the responsibility of reviewing and assessing classic as well as recent work in the area with a list of references that would orient any student – indeed any professor – to the topic. Rather than invite scholars to contribute papers of their own choosing that we would try to stitch together at the last moment, we assigned specific chapters to specific scholars with our fingers crossed.

Happily, our response rate would make survey researchers blush with envy; we were able to secure the overwhelming majority of our first-choices. And as if to test our writers' thresholds of annoyance, we asked them first for detailed outlines of their prospective chapters, and then for first drafts. We then had the temerity to provide feedback on both. All of the authors were patient to the point of long-suffering. Alas, a few had to bow out later owing to various personal contingencies. But we were able to back and fill so that only three chapters out of the original thirty-seven have come up blank – albeit important chapters on social class, sexualities, and India. Otherwise we were gratified that contributors brought their own good ideas for how to treat their topics and approaches. After all, we wanted original contributions, not merely annotated bibliographies. In addition to analysing the central arguments and empirical findings in an area, all chapters reflect their authors' original sense of what is most important in where the field has been and where it is heading. We were especially pleased with those that draw on intellectual resources rarely accessible to readers unfamiliar with languages other than English.

Finally, it may seem puzzling that a printed Handbook is being published at a time when so much information about religion is now available online or in other media. So, why go to the lengths of putting together a large edited collection? Paradoxically, the ready availability of so much information makes a wide-ranging Handbook all the more useful as a series of charts that will help readers to navigate the rapidly rising sea of materials about religion. Put another way, a Handbook can provide a variety of devices for 'decoding' signals that

might otherwise make no sense – or fail to be detected. Equally important, this Handbook offers *critical* assessments of the concepts, methods and theories that are embedded in various accounts of religion in its social and cultural contexts. In other words, a Handbook is a distillation of up-to-date scholarly knowledge and expertise. As such, it enables readers to pause and reflect critically on the flood of digitised information that can sometimes seem engulfing.

Still another function of this Handbook is to connect the past, the present and the future of the sociology of religion in terms of ideas, challenges and prospects. Again, this is a way of channelling the flux of information into frameworks of meaning which can help to make sense of it. Sociological questions about religion have evolved in various ways over more than one hundred years. Not only have the questions changed, but the reasons for asking them have also changed. Assessing the value of current ways of understanding religion necessarily involves knowing about their historical development. Similarly, an informed sense of how sociological approaches to religion may develop in the future depends in large part on understanding their emergence from the past into the present.

CONSTELLATIONS OF TOPICS

Now that we have specified the distinctive characteristics of sociological approaches to religion, provided a brief history of the field that highlights developments, and recounted the process behind the Handbook, we want to conclude by describing its organisation. The chapters are grouped in a relatively small number of constellations or ‘parts’. These are clusters of closely related topics that often occur in the research conducted by sociologists of religion. In view of the wide variety of topics in the sociology of religion – and of the reasons for studying them – we have arranged the contents in a way that caters to as many interests as possible. All of the Handbook’s eight main Parts begin with an introductory note

about the significance of the material covered in each chapter. Here we shall simply indicate the general scope of each Part.

I Theories and Concepts

Without wishing to privilege any particular approaches, we begin with a cluster of high-level theoretical paradigms and the issues that they are both provoked by and provoke. They all provide influential arguments about and distinctive vantage points on the sociological significance of religion. Conversely, they illustrate how religion’s social and cultural importance varies with the perspective from which it is assessed. These chapters take up respectively religion in the classical tradition of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim; in modernity and post-modernity; in the midst of secularisation and sacralisation; in the perspective of rationality and rational choice; and in a globalising world. They are rife with ideas about the direction of long-term religious change and the engines that drive them. On the one hand, theories in the sociology of religion serve as convenient summaries or frameworks of general ideas that have emerged from empirical investigations. On the other hand, theories can also stimulate research by pointing either to puzzling tensions within existing knowledge or to intriguing questions that have never been asked before. Debates about theories provide both continuity and transformation in the history of the sociology of religion.

II Methods of Studying Religion

The focus of the second constellation is on the methods of doing research in the sociology of religion. Its chapter topics range from qualitative field work to large-scale quantitative surveys and then historical research. The aim is to discuss ways of collecting or generating the kind of information that is required to answer sociological questions about religion. A cluster of methodological issues has developed around attempts to make sense of religion in sociological terms. The fundamental challenge is to find ways to make the social aspects of

religion available for systematic examination. How can one measure differences in sanctity, faith or reverence? What are the trade-offs between intensive depth and extensive scope? The debate about appropriate indicators, variables, scales, classifications and typologies of religious phenomena – to say nothing about measurement and comparison – is the ‘ground bass’. To describe research methods as the ‘tools’ of the sociology of religion is to underestimate their importance in helping to determine what can count as evidence of religion in a socio-cultural phenomenon. The choice of methods has a crucial impact on what can be discovered – or, at least, claimed – about religion in different forms and different settings.

III Social Forms and Experiences of Religion

The third constellation deals with some of the primary social forms for producing, reproducing and experiencing religion. They include mainstream congregations, new religious movements, New Age spiritualities and civil religion. It is useful to think of them all as social ‘vehicles’ or ‘vessels’ that transport religion from place to place and across generations. They also give rise to collective identity and solidarity – as well as tension and conflict – among their practitioners. And they convey values, beliefs and practices that are expressed in distinctive forms of language, gesture, ritual, emotion and experience. Moreover, they reflect social and cultural influences filtered by gender, age, family upbringing, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality and other factors.

IV Issues of Power and Control in Religious Organisations

Here the central question involves issues of power – both internal and external – facing religious organisations. Chapters focus on religious professionals, religious orders and schismatic sects, the influence of the Internet, and faith-based initiatives within the US. The changing distribution of authority in religious organisation has long been of particular interest to

sociologists and dates from the classic distinction between church-type and sect-type organisations. But the issues involved radiate beyond Christian groups to affect power and administration in synagogues, mosques, temples and gurdwaras. Analysis of authority and leadership is also inseparable from an understanding of the resources on which religious organisations depend. These topics have been central to the sociology of religion since the late nineteenth century, but their significance has recently been transformed by new technologies of communication. In particular, the Internet has made it possible for religious organisations to develop new forms of authority, leadership and resourcing.

V Religion and Politics

Relations between religion and politics have invariably been close and complex in all regions of the world. The frequently heard claim that Islam is somehow different from other religions because it supposedly does not keep religion and politics separate flies in the face of the facts. In fact, one of the major reasons for studying the sociology of religion is precisely to understand how the spheres of religion and politics influence each other. Chapters here concern religion, the state and violence; America’s distinctive controversy over ‘faith-based initiatives’; religion as regulated and regulator; religious, social and political movements; and religion’s relationship to individuals’ political and ideological preferences. Faith often intervenes in politics to promote its agendas; politics often seeks the legitimacy and influence afforded by faith. Religion has a broader political significance in so far as it contributes towards the regulation of social life and it is, itself, an object of social regulation.

VI Individual Religious Behaviour in Social Context

Religion can evoke intensely subjective and private experiences and emotions as well as strongly held convictions. Nobody seriously doubts that the significance of religion can also

be crucial for personal identity, states of mind and self-worth. Nevertheless, sociological research shows that *social factors* help to shape these subjective phenomena. For example, surveys of reported religious beliefs and experiences generate cross-national patterns of similarity and difference, which – in turn – point to the influence of social factors at the national level. Such findings do not call in question the reality of individual beliefs or experiences; they merely emphasise the need to situate subjective phenomena in broader social and cultural contexts. The list of these contexts is potentially lengthy, but we have selected three of them for especially careful consideration here: ethnicity, age and generation. In each case, sociological research has documented clear – albeit complex – patterns of association between these factors and religion. But this is also an area of research where the testing of existing knowledge and the investigation of new ideas are constantly challenging received wisdom.

VII Religion, Self-identity and the Life-course

In addition to the broad social factors that shape religion at the individual level, sociological research has increasingly turned to examination of identities and the lived experience of religion. This involves looking at the patterned ways of being religious and expressing religious identities. The gendering of the lived experience of religion, for example, has emerged as a highly significant dimension of the sociology of religion. Less attention has been given to the embodied character of religious practice, but researchers are beginning to take more seriously the challenge of understanding the implications of the human body – including the embodied nature of emotion – for the practice of religion. This also involves consideration of the life-course and of the changing links between religion and different stages of life.

VIII Case Studies from Around the World

The final part of the Handbook contains five case studies that illustrate some of the

cross-national variations observed in the nexus between religion, society and culture. These chapters also show that many of the generalisations discussed by other contributors need to be placed in national contexts as well as in a global setting. In fact, each of them calls in question concepts that are routinely used by sociologists of religion in North America and Western Europe. They ‘problematise’ these concepts by showing how they have to be adapted to the particular circumstances that affect religion in other regions of the world. For example, Yang’s chapter shows that the regulation of religion takes very distinctive forms in China, despite evidence of marketisation; the relation between religion and identity is particularly complex in Central and Eastern Europe, according to Borowik’s chapter, following the collapse of communist regimes; the intersection between religion and ethnicity in Israel is overlaid by messianism and neo-traditionalism, as is clear in Sharot’s chapter; Shimazono argues in his chapter that the subtleties of State Shinto in Japan do not fit into a neat category of religious nationalism; and, according to Blancarte’s chapter, Mexico defies many aspects of the ‘Western’ understanding of popular religion and secularisation.

So much for the Handbook’s eight main topic areas. But it is essential to grasp that they constitute only a device for scanning the extent and variety of the territory. In reality, sociological research on religion often cuts across the divisions between constellations. For example, the study of individual emotions or experiences usually situates them in the context of particular forms of religious organisation. Similarly, questions about the intersection between religion and politics often take account of differences in ethnicity, gender or age. These Parts and chapters indicate the various ways in which religion – however it is defined – can be understood in its social and cultural contexts. Taken together, they also make the case that sociological approaches to religion are different from theological, philosophical or psychological approaches. All these approaches can complement and assist each other, but they have different starting points; ask different questions, and seek different answers. There is no implication here that sociology is superior

to the other approaches to religion (*pace* Milbank 1990), although tensions can arise between them (Radcliffe 1980).

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