

# The SAGE Handbook of Sociology

## The Sociology of Religion

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## Chapter 17: The Sociology of Religion

### Introduction: The Origins of the Sociology of Religion

Religion refers to those processes and institutions that render the social world intelligible, and which bind individuals authoritatively into the social order. Religion is therefore a matter of central importance to sociology. To write sociologically is inevitably to work within a particular tradition that has in advance identified certain issues and themes that are salient in the definition of social phenomena. The fact that a classical sociological tradition has already defined the field in advance appears to be particularly important in the case of religion (O'Toole, 2001; Robertson, 1970). In this overview of the sociology of religion, I pay considerable attention to the legacies of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, who defined the principal issues within the field, with respect to the analysis of the sacred and charisma. Within this tradition, I take the study of institutions to be our primary concern, partly as an analytical strategy to affirm that our topic of inquiry is not with individuals or persons. If we define sociology as the study of institutions, then religious institutions have been a central preoccupation of sociologists. Indeed, the study of religious phenomena, including magic, ritual and myth, was an important feature of the intellectual origins of both anthropology and sociology. A number of social and cultural changes in the Victorian period created the intellectual context within which the sociological study of religion began to flourish in the late nineteenth century. In particular empirical evidence drawn from reports from Africa and Australia by colonial administrators, missionaries and amateur anthropologists fired speculation about the origins of religion. The theory of animism suggested that primitive mentality' was a flawed attempt to understand Nature in the absence of experimental science.

While this interest in primitive religion was overtly located within an emergent social science of comparative civilizations, the covert theme in these Victorian inquiries into primitive society was in fact the growing ambiguity and uncertainty of the role of the Christian church within a social and cultural environment which was itself increasingly secular and where intellectual debate was dominated by the assumptions of natural science and Social Darwinism rather than theology. While these early contributions to sociology and anthropology probed the beliefs and practices of primitive cultures, they were equally, but more obliquely, an investigation of the role and nature of Christianity within a society where the moral and social authority of the church was being steadily undermined. Anthropological fieldwork inevitably raised relativistic problems [p. 285 ↓ ] about the truth of religious beliefs in primitive society and as a consequence they inevitably raised relativistic questions about the rationality and validity of Christian mythology. These tensions between science and religion in Britain were beautifully illustrated in Mrs Humphrey Ward's novel *Robert Elsemere*, in which Elsemere's faith is gradually compromised and finally undermined by his exposure to the relativistic theme of anthropological research, resulting in his transition from Unitarian belief to humanistic scepticism to socialism (MacIntyre, 1969).

The rise of the anthropology and sociology of religion should also be seen against the background of the dominance of natural scientific thought in the second half of the nineteenth century, namely a mode of scientific thinking that was shaped by an evolutionary paradigm. Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection were translated into a general theory of society in Social Darwinism, within which Christianity was simply an aspect of social evolution. Christianity as a religion had no particular or privileged position in cultural evolution. Social Darwinism, with its emphasis on conflict and struggle as the motors of evolutionary adaptation, provided a general social theory of historical development and social differentiation. Karl Marx integrated political economy and social Darwinism into a powerful theory of history and social formations, in which the stages of the mode of production were linked together into an evolutionary chain from primitive communism, through feudalism, to capitalism and socialism.

While Marx's philosophy of history was a product of this combination of social Darwinism and political economy, his analysis of religion was based upon a critique of Hegel's idealism and Ludwig Feuerbach's sensualism (Turner, 1991). In Marx's

theory of ideology, religious beliefs were representations of the particular economic conditions of specific modes of production. Thus, Roman Catholicism was well suited to the political and economic structures of feudalism, whereas the individualistic beliefs of Protestant Christianity were seen to be an expression of the possessive individualism of competitive capitalist economies. Marx, adopting an evolutionary view of religious beliefs, assumed along with Engels that religion would evaporate once exposed to 'critical criticism' and scientific socialism. The social crisis of Victorian Britain that produced the sociology of religion included the erosion of Christianity, the political threat of working class socialism and the intellectual threat of Social Darwinism and evolutionary thought (Burrow, 1966).

Nineteenth-century theories of economic industrialization provided the foundations of early theories of secularization. It was assumed that the transition from rural to urban society, or from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, with the growth of industrial capitalism, had destroyed the social and moral basis for the church's authority over society. The social and historical development of Europe was conceptualized chronologically into separate ages of faith and ages of secularity. For writers like Claude Saint-Simon, the 'feudal-theological system' was gradually being replaced by a new social order based upon the industrial classes and positivistic science. In the industrial-scientific system, the government of human beings would be transformed into the administration of things. He predicted the rise of a new religion based on humanism and science that he called the New Christianity. For Auguste Comte, in his positivistic and humanist philosophy, medieval society, which was characterized by the dominance of the Catholic Church and by militarism, would be replaced by a new social system in which scientists and industrialists would occupy the dominant social roles. He anticipated the creation of a religion of humanity which replaced the derelict Christianity of his period (Wernick, 2001). In the sociological writings of Herbert Spencer, the separation of military from industrial society had become a common assumption of dissenting liberals. The collapse of the old military-theological system created a crisis in social organization and individual consciousness; especially for the social establishment and conservative thought.

While the sociology and anthropology of religion was sharply divided into a variety of competing theories, there was a core of assumptions about the nature of religion and science which provided the underlying framework in [p. 286 ↓ ] the late nineteenth

century for the analysis of religion (Marrett, 1909; Tylor, 1891). The first assumption was that rationality, defined operationally by the methods of experimental science, was the guiding principle of industrial society. Truth was produced by the evidence made available to human reason by the intervention of experimental science. Positivistic science was the unambiguous benchmark for the evolution of civilization, a benchmark that neatly contrasted the primitive mentality with the modern mind (Levy-Bruhl, 1923, 1985). In primitive religion, individuals were thought to make sense of their natural environment through a system of magical and erroneous beliefs. The emphasis was upon the cognitive apprehension of reality by isolated individuals who were quaintly perceived as 'ancient philosophers'. The second assumption was that human history was characterized by an evolutionary scheme in which societies passed through a series of definite and necessary stages from simple to more complex forms. Within this evolutionary scheme, humanity passed from primitive magic and fetishism through religion to contemporary science. Third, along with the assumptions of the dominant system, individualism was taken to be the primary moral and political characteristic of an advanced civilization.

Although these evolutionary theories were designed to understand primitive cultures, they represented a major intellectual challenge to Christianity. One significant problem for Protestant intellectuals was how to explain the differences between primitive rituals such as a communal meal and Christian practice such as the Eucharist. One solution was to appeal to evolutionary theory itself in order to argue that Protestantism was the most highly evolved religion, and that its rituals and beliefs were essentially abstract propositions that could be justified by rational argument. Christian theology attempts to express religious truths through abstractions that have replaced the concrete metaphors and ideas about actual relationships. This solution was adopted by W. Robertson Smith, whose *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1997 [1889]) were particularly important for Durkheim's sociological understanding of the functional significance of rituals.

Interpretations of the intellectual origins of the sociology of religion have contrasted the sociological emphasis on collective rituals with psychological theories of individual cognition. In *Theories of Primitive Religion*, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) distinguished early psychological approaches, starting with R. de Brosses's theory of fetishism and theories of the soul in the work of E.B. Tylor, Max Müller and J.G. Frazer from the sociological theories of Émile Durkheim, Robert Hertz, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss.

Frazer's (1935 [1890]) *The Golden Bough* was characteristic of speculative reflections on the evolutionary and comparative significance of mythology. In a definitive overview of the early tradition, William J. Goode (1951), in his *Religion Among the Primitives*, distinguished between animistic-manist theories which were particularly influential among the English anthropologists, naturalistic theories which were embraced by writers like Müller (1997 [1892]), psychoanalytic theories which were developed by Sigmund Freud in his *Totem and Taboo* (1950), and sociological interpretations of religion in the work of Smith, Durkheim and Mauss.

Although these nineteenth-century theories of religion were influential, they have come under extensive intellectual criticism, which laid the foundation of modern approaches to religion in anthropology and sociology. Theories of animism-manism and naturism shared, as I have indicated, a common set of assumptions – the centrality of the individual, positivism, natural science as an exclusive paradigm of rationality, and evolutionism, which were challenged in Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961 [1912]). Durkheim rejected any discussion of the truth or falsity of religious belief as simply misplaced: 'there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion, all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence' (Durkheim, 1961: 15). The task of sociology was to discover 'the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend' (Durkheim, 1961: 20). The [p. 287 ↓] individualistic definitions of religion in animism were too specific, because belief in spiritual beings was not universal to religions. For example, Theravada Buddhism is non-theistic. Durkheim defined religion as a 'unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, 1961: 62). Cognitive approaches such as Tylor's minimalist definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings, by concentrating on the individual's rational apprehension of the world, failed to draw attention to the emotional and performative character of religious practices, and the obligatory nature of involvement in religious institutions. Durkheim, along with R.R. Marrett, William McDougall and Arnold van Gennep, rejected Frazer's 'intellectualist psychology of religion' in which the primitive community was composed of a collection of discrete minds directed at a rational evaluation of nature (Ackerman, 1987). Unlike the intellectual beliefs of philosophers, belief in the sacred character

of the totem was not a voluntary or private option. Durkheim also dismissed Müller's naturism as merely the vision of nature of modern city-dwellers. In traditional societies, nature was more likely to be seen as regular and monotonous, and totemic objects are often far from awe-inspiring. Durkheim's sociological perspective laid the foundation for subsequent approaches to the sacred, especially in the French tradition of the work of Marcel Mauss (2001 [1902]), Robert Hertz, Henri Hubert, Roger Callois and René Girard (1988 [1972]). Durkheim's approach also contributed fundamentally to the social anthropology of Robert H. Lowie (Murphy, 1972) and Mary Douglas (1966, 1970).

## Durkheim on Classification, Knowledge and Religion

Durkheim took the decisive steps towards a genuine sociology of religion in which he interpreted religion as a collective classification of reality. The implications of Durkheim's approach are that religion involves a special type of knowledge that is embedded in collective practices that are reinforced by shared emotions. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* had three distinctive aims. The first was to study a simple religious system, namely Australian totemism, in order to understand the elementary forms of religious life. The second was to study elementary forms of thought such as the distinction between sacred and profane, and finally to establish generalizations about social relations and classification in all human societies.

*Primitive Classification* Durkheim and Mauss (1963 [1903]) clearly anticipated the more complex and complete presentation of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1961[1912]). Both publications attempt sociologically to understand forms of classification, especially forms of religious classification that divide the world into the sacred and the profane. Durkheim's intention was also to give a sociological account of the fundamental forms or structures of consciousness.

The basic argument exhibits the classic features of Durkheim's sociology. We cannot understand forms of consciousness by a study of the consciousness of separate individuals. More specifically, we cannot grasp the nature of thought through a psychological study of the contents of human minds. The social comes before the



individual, and thus to understand consciousness (or classification) we need to study its social forms: 'it is enough to examine the very idea of classification to understand that man could not have found its essential elements in himself... Every classification implies a hierarchical order for which neither the tangible world nor our mind gives us the model' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 7–8). It is the social divisions of society that provide the divisions of classification, and so the first logical categories were social. However, the force of these categories depends on their affective force. Thus 'for those who are called primitives, a species of things is not a simple object of knowledge, but corresponds above all to a certain sentimental attitude. All kinds of affective [p. 288 ↓] elements combine in the representation ... it is this emotional value of notions which plays the preponderant part in the manner in which ideas are connected or separated. It is the dominant characteristic in classification' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 85–6).

We may re-state their argument as claiming that the authority of a classification system receives its force from classificatory systems that are collective, and which are sustained by a shared emotional life. However, this argument raises the obvious question about modern society, namely what happens to the authority of classificatory systems where the force of collective emotions is diminished by the secularization of religious systems? This question was anticipated very directly in their thesis: 'Thus the history of scientific classification is, in the last analysis, the history of the stages by which this element of social affectivity has progressively weakened, leaving more and more room for the reflective thought of individuals' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 88). Thus the collective and emotional character of classificatory practices in modern societies has broken down, and there is more indeterminacy and uncertainty because individuals can become more reflexive and classificatory principles are contested.

Durkheim's sociology of classification was the basis of his sociology of religion, in that religion is a method of apprehending reality in terms of the force of the classificatory principle: sacred/profane. His approach also anticipated a major theme of the secularization thesis, which is concerned with the bases of social order in societies where the traditional force of classificatory schema have collapsed. Although the secularization debate has a decisively historical framework, Durkheim's analysis of classification was typological rather than historical. Durkheim's pragmatist and functionalist account of the social consequences of religious practice neglected the historical dimensions of religious institutions, especially the organizational structures



and roles of ecclesiastical organizations. Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber developed these historical aspects of religion in the German tradition of the sociology of religion. Whereas British and French anthropologists had concentrated on the generic nature of religious and magical symbols and customs, German sociology arose from a specific concern with the historical role of Christianity in Western society, and with the organizational forms of Christian institutions. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1930 [1904–5]) analysed the relationship between Protestant beliefs and the individualistic and secular culture of emerging capitalism. In *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch (1931 [1912]) developed a contrast between sect and church as a model of organizational development and change in Christianity, a model which used Weber's analysis of charismatic breakthrough (Weber, 1966).

## Max Weber: Sociology and the Secularization Debate

Sociology has been specifically concerned to understand the origins and development of modernity, and it has seen religion as a crucial component of the social process of modernization. This interest in religion and modernity had three distinctive components: the impact of religion on economic norms and behaviour; the contribution of religions to the development of political regimes such as democracy; and the consequences of religion for cultural development broadly conceived.

Weber's sociology involved the study of the economic and political ethics of the world religions (Weber, 1966). Weber was concerned to understand whether Christianity, as a cultural precondition for rational economic behaviour, could ultimately survive capitalism and whether the democratic ethos of secular institutions would eventually undermine the hierarchical notions of charismatic authority that underpin ecclesiastical organizations. Weber's sociology was characterized by the theme of the fatefulness of Western institutions, namely how values can be self-destructive (Turner, 1996). For example, religious asceticism was self-defeating in producing the spirit of capitalism, which came eventually to negate [p. 289 ↓ ] Christian spirituality. Weber also thought the modern power politics that was made possible by the separation of religion and

politics in Christianity would corrode the tradition of Christian brotherly love. While historians have disputed the validity of Weber's historical sociology of religions, his sociological questions about religion, politics and economics have proved to be extraordinarily productive and imaginative.

In his introduction to Weber's *The Sociology of Religion*, Talcott Parsons (1966) argued that Weber's sociology of religion was concerned to understand the social leverage that religion has exercised over processes of social change. This social leverage is an effect of the strength and tenacity of the division between the sacred and the profane, or between religious ideals and the world. The confrontation with the world produced a range of different soteriologies or doctrines of salvation. These soteriologies in Weber hinge critically around the dichotomy between asceticism and mysticism. Asceticism was particularly important in the rational response of Protestantism to the control of sexuality and money, but this-worldly soteriologies are not peculiar to Christianity. For example, within the Abrahamic religions, politics and religion have remained in a dialectical tension, and this tension has played a creative role in the development of democratic politics as an urban form of participatory politics. Because the Abrahamic religions shared a universal notion of justice, they have the potential to function as a powerful critique of earthly politics.

The doctrine of the church as a community free from coercion provided a powerful contrast to the state which Weber (1978) famously defined as an institution that has a monopoly of violence within a given territory. The church as a parallel society provided normative criteria by which bad government could, in principle, be evaluated. The church provided a public space within which concepts of justice, equality and community (or brotherhood) evolved as components of a theology of political institutions. However, the association of the church with this world exposed the religious community to corruption and co-optation. For example, the rise of the national church involved religious functionaries in power-sharing. Thus, the dialectic of sacred and profane can be seen paradoxically as a force that assisted the rise of the modern citizen (Weber, 1958). This dialectic is not peculiar to Western culture; similar arguments can be and have been made about the relationship between Buddhism and society, specifically between the monastic order and the secular state. In Buddhist legend, King Asoka was both conqueror and Buddhist monk.

This interweaving of religion and politics, brotherly love and violence constituted the tragic vision of Weber's sociology. Politics requires authoritative methods for the distribution of resources and must resort to coercive means to establish order. In the last analysis, politics is about the prudent use of force in society to preserve order. For Weber, religious institutions are channels of symbolic (charismatic) violence that coerce behaviour through sacred force, while political institutions require secular force. While political institutions must exert violence, religious communities are based on 'brotherly love' and therefore politics and religion must exist in a state of mutual tension. Paradoxically, they are both required for the creation of social order.

The core feature of this theory is the explication of the historical role of charisma in human societies. Weber employed a theory of charismatic breakthrough to understand the secular dynamic of authority and leadership in social institutions. His main intention was to compare and contrast three types of authority: charismatic, traditional and legal-rational. In *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1978: 241), the term charisma is 'applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities'. Traditional authority involves the acceptance of an implicit rule that expresses a custom, namely an established pattern of belief or practice. Finally, legal-rational authority is typical of bureaucracies in which formal conduct is underpinned by procedural norms. These forms of authority are in turn modes of compliance. Tradition depends on compliance [p. 290 ↓] through empathy; legal-rational authority rests on rational argument; and charismatic leadership requires inspiration.

Charismatic authority is confronted by a generic problem of succession with the death of the leader and charismatic authority is consequently unstable. With the death of the charismatic leader, the disciples typically disband, but occasionally alternative solutions for continuity will be developed. In the case of the Christian Church, the charismatic authority of Christ was invested in the church itself (as the body of Christ) and thus in the bishops who, by their control over the 'keys of grace', enjoy a stable vicarious authority. This 'institutionalization of charisma' becomes over time increasingly formal, bureaucratic and impersonal. Weber defined the 'routinization of charisma' in terms of the transformation of the charismatic power of Christ into a set of formal procedures and bureaucratic rules. Charisma is institutionally important in the definition of different

religious roles and patterns of organization. For example, Weber distinguished between the prophet who, as a charismatic figure, has a personal call, and the priest who has authority by virtue of his office in the church and his service in a sacred tradition. The prophets, who may emerge from the ranks of the priesthood, are unremunerated, and therefore depend on gifts from followers (Weber, 1952).

The institutions through which people gain access to charismatic gifts have important implications for broader issues of social organization and political power. Where the church was able to claim an exclusive monopoly of the means of grace, then there was a rigid and detailed hierarchy of authority between priests and laity, and the hierarchies of earthly power were a reflection of sacred hierarchies. The democratization of religious membership, which has been characteristic of modern societies, contrasts sharply with the idea that authentic charisma is unequally distributed through human societies or that some people are constitutionally unmusical. The notion that the stratification of religious charisma lies at the foundation of the world religions was central to Weber's sociology of religion. Whereas Troeltsch had developed the idea of church-sect typology, Weber constructed his analysis of religious authority around the idea of virtuoso and mass religiousness. The virtuosi, both ascetic and mystical, are detached from mundane constraints (typically of work and reproduction) and in exchange for their charismatic gifts (prophecy, visions and healing) they receive tributes (money, food and shelter) from the laity. The history of religious institutions is the history of, more or less unsuccessful, attempts to routinize the channels of charisma through the official agencies of the church. The institutionalization of these sacred powers also produced Weber's view of the historical dynamic of church and state, in which the church strove to monopolize symbolic force, and the state to achieve a monopoly of physical violence in a given territory. When these two systems coalesced into Caesaropapism, total power precluded any dynamic social change.

Given the mundane needs and demands of everyday life, only the virtuosi (the monks and priests) can fully embrace the religious commandments and ritual practices that are required to achieve salvation. The laity are in this sense parasitic on the efforts of the elite to seek out salvation on their behalf. It is for this reason that the evangelical revolution of the eighteenth century, which through field preaching took religion to the people, brought about a profound political revolution. It began the modern process of the democratization of religion that overthrew the ancient division between the

religious elite and the masses (Sharot, 2001). In his visit to the United States in 1904, Weber was obviously aware of the elective affinity between capitalism and the Baptist sects, but he did not grasp the full spiritual implications of democracy for the American soul. This theme was powerfully developed by Alexis de Tocqueville (1968 [1835–40]) in *Democracy in America*, for whom voluntary associations such as religious denominations were an essential component of democratic participation at the local or community level.

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## American Denominations and Religious Pluralism

The American War of Independence and the framing of the Constitution specifically precluded the idea of an established church with a special relationship to the state, and as a result denominational pluralism has been a fundamental aspect of social and political life in the United States. With every wave of migration, the settlers built their own churches and created a dynamic mosaic of religious belief and practice. This process was important in the building of national identity, since, while the church and state were separate, religion became an important foundation of social membership and identity. Will Herberg (1955) developed the classic explanation of the relationship between religion, ethnicity and identity, in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* in terms of a theory of generational loyalties. First generation migrants to America clung to the religion of their homeland out of sheer necessity. The second generation typically rejected the religious commitments of their parents as they became acculturated in secular society, and became Americans. The third generation returned to religion as a form of social membership and identity in a world that was alienated by the new corporate culture and individualism. In short, people could retain their religious identities provided everybody became American. Some critics of American religiosity have, however, argued that the denominational label was bought at the cost of any content. President Eisenhower was alleged to have remarked that every American should have a religion, and he didn't care which one it was. Religion appeared to meld into secular culture as a form of personal comfort. David Riesman (1950) in *The Lonely Crowd* analysed the American personality

as the other-directed character that depends on constant approval and affirmation from others. In *The Organization Man*, WH. Whyte (1956) described the company executives of corporate America, who are mobile, disconnected from their local communities and dedicated to personal achievement within the organization. These organizational commitments encouraged conformity and alienated these executives from family and community. Religion provided an anchor in this fragile world of urban sprawl, consumerism and mobility.

While generational changes can explain membership of the churches, sociologists of religion regarded this enthusiasm for religious belonging as evidence of secularization, because denominational loyalties appeared to have more to do with social membership than with faith (Wilson, 1966, 1976). Indeed, much of the statistical evidence on religious commitment demonstrated that orthodox belief and knowledge of the Christian faith were declining despite high levels of organizational involvement (Glock and Stark, 1965). Denominational competition often meant that the demands of religion were reduced in order to make membership a comfortable experience. Peter Berger (1969) in *The Social Reality of Religion* and Thomas Luckmann (1967) in *The Invisible Religion* argued that in modern society denominational pluralism had come to resemble a spiritual marketplace in which the laity could pick and choose whatever beliefs and practices satisfied their individual needs. The result was the gradual erosion of orthodox belief and religious discipline. The religious supermarket was perfectly in tune with the cultural climate of the 1960s as an age of experiment and individualism (Edmunds and Turner, 2002). The growth of fundamentalism in the United States has been in part a critical response to the spread of liberal theology in the churches, to feminism in education and secular culture in the media (Armstrong, 2001).

The boundaries of popular religion are constantly redrawn under the impact of large postwar generations, facilitated by an expanding religious marketplace. It is impossible therefore to understand religion in contemporary America without taking into account the impact of the 'baby boomers' (Roof, 1993). The culture wars of the postwar period radically reorganized the map of mainstream religion in North America. Denominational pluralism is a spiritual marketplace that, in the absence of an established church, stimulates organizational innovation and cultural [p. 292 ↓ ] entrepreneurship. The concept of a spiritual supermarket was originally developed by Peter Berger to describe secularization and the crisis of plausibility in a religious context where individuals can



shop around to solve their spiritual needs. The market for religious innovations is a response to massive social change in contemporary America in which an expanding consumer culture has produced the self as the principal target of consumption. There was an 'expressive revolution' (Parsons, 1999), in which personal identity was sought and explored through a new subjectivity. In the market place of seekers, five major subcultures have been identified: dogmatists (for example fundamentalists and neo-traditionalists), mainstream believers, born-again Christians (including evangelicals, Pentecostals and charismatics), metaphysical believers and seekers, and secularists (Roof, 1999). The baby-boomer culture promoted the idea of religion as a personal quest. While Americans may invest less time in voluntary associations and are less certain about traditional Christian values than previous generations, they are significantly involved in spiritual searching that has produced a deeper emphasis on self-understanding and self-reflexivity. As the baby-boomers mature they are moving out of the narcissistic culture of the 1960s into a deeper, more serious quest culture. If traditional religious cultures depended heavily on the continuity of the family as an agency of socialization, the transformation of family life and the entry of women into the formal labour market have radically destabilized religious identities and cultures.

Within this marketplace, the conservative churches continue to have an important appeal (Smith, 2000). The reasons why conservative Christian churches have been more successful than liberal Christianity is somewhat obvious. Conservative Protestants have more children, and discourage contact with people who are childless or divorced (Ammerman, 1987). People in conservative churches retain their membership, because they want their children to be raised through a religious education. We can understand why people stay in conservative churches, but why proportionately do more liberals join conservative churches? Why are the mainline churches such as the Presbyterians and Methodist denominations in decline, while the more conservative denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God are flourishing?

Dean Kelley (1977) provided one classic explanation for success in terms of a theory of the costliness of commitment. Kelley's thesis is that the content of a religious message is less important for success than the demands it places on its members. Costliness is measured by control over members' lifestyles, the development of a strong church and the seriousness of religious commitment. Kelley's successful churches require a totalitarian and hierarchical form of authority and homogeneous communities; such



successful congregations are unlike liberal religious groups that impose few sanctions on their members. Kelley's thesis has been widely influential, but contemporary research provides only partial support for the strong church thesis (Tamney, 2002). Conservative congregations support a traditional gender division of labour and conventional gender identities; in a society that is deeply divided over gender issues, such reassurance is psychologically attractive. Secondly, in a relativist culture, the certainties of religious teaching on morality are supportive. Finally, traditional religious orientations may serve to articulate political commitments around major issues relating to abortion, gay and lesbian sexuality, education and the family. American society is a spiritual marketplace in which the loyalty of congregations cannot be taken for granted. Religion has to be sold, alongside other cultural products, and the religious market is volatile, with people moving in and out of congregations in search of an appropriate niche.

Behind these developments in the American religious marketplace stands the figure of Alexis de Tocqueville. His view of religion was conservative in that religion in America could exercise moral constraint over the masses, but remain separate from the state, and hence the dangers of revolutionary France could be avoided (Wolin, 2001: 237–8). However, [p. 293 ↓ ] Tocqueville was also struck by the importance of association for democracy. Religious pluralism, an emphasis on self-realization and voluntary association membership, and local responsibility are manifestations of the democratic revolution, and constitute a democratization of religion. The revolutionary assumption that everybody has religious opinions and that all opinions are equally valid has produced the American religious marketplace, where priestly authority and ecclesiastical hierarchy do not find comfortable locations. In this sense, Methodism with its commitment to the priesthood of all believers, lay participation, emotional subjectivity and congregational autonomy was the harbinger of religious modernization, the logical outcome of which is a society in which everybody has his or her own personal religion.

## Religion and Politics in Europe

By comparison with the United States, the Christian churches in Europe have since the beginning of the nineteenth century been subject to a profound process of secularization. There is clear evidence of secularization in the sense that

membership of and participation in Christian churches have declined (Wilson, 1976). However, religious identity continues to play an important role in national identity and consciousness, for example in Ireland and Poland. In *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Troeltsch (1931) had argued that the oscillation between church and sect that had shaped much of European history had come to an end with the final collapse of the universal church. While sects continue to flourish, there is incontrovertible evidence of institutional decline of mainstream Christianity (Wilson, 1970). Within this general pattern of decline, there are, however, discernible differences between the predominantly Roman Catholic and Protestant regions and states (Martin, 1978).

Catholicism, prior to political liberalization in the late twentieth century, was central to the expression of nationalism in continental Europe and remained a major counterweight to communism. Catholicism exercised hegemonic moral leadership over the working class in European politics (Gramsci, 1971). This social and cultural hegemony has been closely associated with religious control over education, and the dominance of the Catholic Church on the European right guaranteed that regional, party and class divisions were often drawn along religious lines. This hegemonic influence continued after the Second World War, when Catholicism played an important cultural and political role in relation to atheist communism. The Polish Solidarity movement and the revival of Russian Orthodoxy demonstrated decisively the capacity of religion to survive communism and to act as a platform of social protest and national renewal. Irish national identity and republicanism have also been thoroughly merged within the Catholic tradition, and as a result the Protestant-Catholic divide in Northern Ireland has remained an obdurate fact of political life. In Spain, General Franco, who came to power in 1936 following his attack on the socialist government, was decidedly Catholic and supported traditional values against godless atheism. The collapse of the Franco regime following his death in 1975 has resulted in the rapid diminution of the public authority of the church in Spanish politics. With the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism, Catholicism has played a diminished role in the articulation of nationalism and national identity. Economic prosperity, growing multiculturalism and migration have brought about a partial divorce between state and church.

In Protestant Europe, the relationship with the state has been more remote, and hence the political influence of the churches has been less significant. While the

Catholic Church resisted Protestant infiltration in France, Spain and Italy, the Protestant countries have been religiously more diverse and Protestant churches have enjoyed a privileged rather than monopolistic social position (Robertson, 1970: 125). In the Lutheran traditions of Scandinavia, the churches have been incorporated into the state, and religious functionaries were a component of the official bureaucracy. In Norway, the constitution both proclaims the existence of [p. 294 ↓ ] religious freedom and recognizes the Evangelical Lutheran religion as the official religion of the state. In practice, the separation of church and state is recognized, despite the fact that the cabinet has the right to appoint bishops. In the United Kingdom, the Church of England functions as a national church with the monarch as head, but religious tolerance and pluralism have been accepted principles of British liberalism. The political transition from a confessional state to religious pluralism has been typical of English political gradualism in which discriminatory laws against Catholics and Jews were pragmatically abandoned rather than rejected explicitly by an assertion of religious freedom. While the devolution of powers to regional parliaments in Scotland and Wales has weakened the political significance of the Church of England, Anglicanism remains an important ingredient of the conservative vision of Englishness, but there are important elements of cosmopolitanism among the English establishment that are not defined by religion (Edmunds and Turner, 2001).

The political history of religion in Western Europe was dominated by two issues, namely church-state relations and the cultural divisions between Protestantism and Catholicism. This historic pattern has been slowly broken by migration, the globalization of the European economy and the emergence of multicultural politics. Postwar European economic prosperity has combined with a greying population to produce a multicultural society that has satisfied its labour market needs by encouraging migrant labour. The working-age population of Europe is declining rapidly and by 2030 it is estimated that the ratio of working taxpayers to pensioners in Germany and Italy will drop to below 1:1. In the UK the census report of the office of National Statistics has shown that in 2001 there were more people over 60 years of age than under 16 years of age. Young migrants whose fertility rates are typically higher than the host population have filled the gap between workers and the retired section of the population. Economic dependency on foreign labour has drawn in significant numbers of non-Christian migrants, whose presence is permanently changing the cultural map of Europe. In many European

countries the foreign migrant community represents 10 per cent of the host population. The most significant group, both in numbers and influence, is Muslim. There are 10–13 million Muslims in Europe, and in Germany foreigners will make up 30 per cent of the population by 2030.

Ageing populations and labour shortages in the developed world will ensure that immigration and religion remain on the political agenda of European societies. Migrants from Pakistan to Britain, from Turkey to Germany, from the Middle East and North Africa to France, from Indonesia to the Netherlands have produced a diasporic politics that has raised fears about the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on cultural and political institutions. In Germany, Turks and Kurds entered the labour market in the 1960s and 1970s and these guest workers' now constitute a more or less permanent second generation, amounting to approximately 2 million people. While many of these migrants are secular, Islamic organizations play an important part in their social and political organization. In France, there is a strong nationalist feeling that North African Muslims cannot assimilate to the secular culture of the French republic. The *hijab* case (*l'affaire des foulards*) in 1989 caused a divisive public debate over the desire of Muslim girls to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) in state schools. The French intellectual left regard secular schools as important for personal liberation from religious ideology, while the right interpret the *hijab* as an attack on French national custom (El Hamel, 2002). In English culture, where there has been a historical tradition of distrust towards Islam, a *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for his publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 polarized British public opinion, and reinforced the public perception of Muslims as fanatics whose culture is fundamentally incompatible with parliamentary democracy and liberal values. In recent legislation there has been some accommodation to the beliefs and practices of other religions, such as the acceptance of customs relating to the wearing of turbans by Sikhs, animal slaughter and solemnization of marriages.

Latin Christianity had created a common religious and political culture in medieval Europe. The Reformation and the division of [p. 295 ↓ ] Europe broke this dominant culture into competing states with distinctive national religions. The growth of nationalism in Europe had diverse consequences for the churches, but religious symbols, often combined with epic literature and folk culture, have been indispensable for the creation of nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983). Conservative governments, against the threat of secular communism, have often harnessed the

political vitality of religious symbols in nation formation. The collapse of communism as a significant atheist alternative to religious belief systems had important implications for Christianity, but Islam has been ideologically constructed to fill the space left by communism.

In addition to the growth of Islam, there has been an important growth in sectarian and cultic religion. European governments have frequently attempted to curb the development of such sects by legislative means; there is considerable public hostility to new age' groups, Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses (Hamilton, 1995; Heelas, 1996). In 1995 the British Home Secretary refused entry to the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who had planned to enter the UK to hold services for the Unification Church, and in Germany, the federal government has identified 25 'sects' that are seen to be a threat to 'democratic values'. These religious tensions of a multicultural society are now a persistent aspect of European politics, and are an indication of the fact that the traditional Protestant-Catholic division of European politics has been further complicated by social hybridity. Changes in the nature of the study of religion as a European institution are thus reflections of the growth of global religious cultures (Robertson, 1992).

## Contemporary Sociology of Religion: Globalization and Fundamentalism

The sociology of religion had become during the 1960s and 1970s an important component of mainstream sociology in both Europe and the United States. Drawing its intellectual inspiration from Weber and Durkheim, the sociology of religion was primarily concerned with the church-sect typology and the secularization debate. In the UK, Wilson and Martin dominated an empirical research tradition while in the United States Berger, Luckmann and Robertson provided an integration of the legacies of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and developed the sociology of knowledge around the theme of the social construction of reality. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the sociology of religion went into steep intellectual decline in Europe, and became marginal to mainstream sociology in the United States.

There has been an important revival of the study of religion in contemporary sociology, but with a different intellectual agenda. Fundamentalism and modernity, globalization and inter-cultural conflict, religion and politics, religious movements and ethnic identity are the key issues for sociological analysis. The debate about the clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1997) has propelled the phenomenon of the sacred, especially the Islamic version of fundamentalism, into sharp political focus. Whereas religion was thought to be on the social margins in the 1980s, it is now regarded as a constitutive feature of modern social movements. In classical sociology, the main issues were the impact of the capitalist economy on organized religion, and the capacity of organized Christianity to contain radical working-class politics. In contemporary sociology, the issues are the place of religion in globalization, the tensions between fundamentalism (in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and modernity, and the role of religion in providing an ideological conduit for the frustrations and anger of alienated youth. There is a dilemma for Islam and Christianity in that their very success in addressing the secular issues of politics may compromise their capacity to address the traditional issues of spirituality (Luhmann, 1984).

While mainstream Christianity declined in Europe throughout the twentieth century, there has been a significant growth of Pentecostalism and its charismatic penumbra, and approximately one-quarter of a billion people are adherents, or one in twenty-five of the global [p. 296 ↓ ] population. The growth of fundamentalism and charismatic Pentecostalism are both aspects of globalization (Martin, 2002). In Latin America and Africa, Pentecostalism recruits among the 'respectable poor' whose ambition is successfully to enter the modern world, and in West Africa and Southeast Asia, it is most prevalent among the new middle classes, including the Chinese diaspora. Pentecostalism has also expanded among social minorities in Nepal, the Andes and inland China. While in Latin America Pentecostalism functions as a religion of the oppressed, offering them hope, social inclusion and welfare services, in North America and Europe Pentecostalism has spread through charismatic movements within the existing churches and denominations.

Pentecostalism can be interpreted sociologically through a comparison with the history of Methodism, which spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among the working and lower middle classes. While its inclusive Arminian theology and emotional evangelism proved attractive to the poor and the socially deprived, Methodist discipline,



teetotalism and literacy helped the laity ascend the social ladder. In the United States, employers favoured Methodist workers, who were hard-working and reliable (Pope, 1942). Contemporary Pentecostalism has similar characteristics. The 'Pentecostal virtues' include betterment through education, self-discipline and control, social aspiration, responsibility and hard work. These technologies of the self produce socially mobile people, but Pentecostalism also offers psychological liberation. There is an elective affinity between Pentecostalism, the spread of liberal capitalism and 'the expressive revolution' (Parsons, 1999). Pentecostalism, which as an organization is devolved, voluntary and local, works within a religious market that offers spiritual uplift, social success and emotional gratification. Whereas Methodism supplied the work ethic of early capitalism, Pentecostalism is relevant to the work skills and personal attributes of the postindustrial service economy, especially self-monitoring and a refusal to accept social failure.

The sociological study of Pentecostalism is important, because it raises serious questions about the assumption that fundamentalist movements are traditional, or indeed anti-modern. Pentecostalism is highly congruent with the voluntaristic and plural ethos of liberal capitalism, and appears to promote rather than reject the emotional individualism of late modernity. Similar conceptual problems arise with the perception that Islam is a traditional religion. In the popular press, fundamentalism is normally equated with radical Islam, and Islam is understood to be hostile to modernity. Fundamentalism has a number of defining themes. The emphasis on scripture requires a literal belief in the inerrant nature of the fundamental scriptures, and the quest for legitimacy and authority by reference to those scriptures. There is an emphasis on seeing the relevance of traditional scriptures to contemporary issues. In addition, there is a personal quest for purity in an impure world, and an attempt to reject the division between the sacred and the profane. Fundamentalism involves confrontation with the secular world, by violent means if necessary, and a world-view that understands the modern world in terms of an endless struggle between good and evil.

The study of fundamentalism has therefore become a major preoccupation of contemporary sociology of religion (Hassan, 2002). In terms of their core membership and leadership, fundamentalists are recruited from the educated but alienated urban social classes. They are frustrated science teachers, unpaid civil servants, disillusioned doctors and underemployed engineers. In short, fundamentalists are recruited from



those social groups that have failed to benefit fully from secular nationalist governments and aborted modernization projects. Their principal recruiting ground has been the new technological universities that were built by nationalist governments as aspects of the project of modernization. These technical students have been at the forefront of the 'Islamization of knowledge' which has attempted to challenge Western systems of science and humanities (Abaza, 2002).

This pattern of recruitment suggests that fundamentalism is not a traditional protest against modernity, but instead these social [p. 297 ↓ ] movements are characterized by their selective approach to modernization and their controlled pattern of acculturation (Antoun, 2001). Selective modernization refers to the process whereby certain technological and organizational innovations of modern society are accepted and others are rejected. The second characterization refers to the process whereby an individual accepts a practice or belief from another culture (the secular world) and integrates it into their value system (the religious world). One illustration of the process of selective modernization is the use of television and radio by fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States. Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) is now the third largest cable network in America, and funds the CBN University, offering courses on media production techniques. James Dobson's radio programme *Focus on the Family*, which offers psychological advice and counselling services, is another example.

Among Islamic radical groups, modern technology is also avidly embraced. In Beirut the militant Hezbollah group has an information network with mobile phones, computers and multiple-version website. Controlled acculturation is a common strategy of Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists that involves physical separation between the religious and secular world. In Israel, Jewish fundamentalists who have to take university courses in academic settings that are secular and liberal have negotiated special arrangements, for example to be taught by men. In Saudi Arabia, fundamentalists have used distance learning techniques to avoid contact with women who are thought to be immodestly dressed. Fundamentalist groups are not therefore wholly opposed to modernity, and have adapted various modern technologies to improve their organizational and communications effectiveness.

Thus, fundamentalists are not traditionalists; on the contrary, they are specifically hostile to traditional religion, which in their view has compromised the fundamental tenets of

faith, and by embracing modern technology and organizational forms fundamentalist movements are, often as an unintended consequence, ushering in radical modernity. This interpretation of fundamentalism is perfectly compatible with the Weber thesis in which the Protestant sects were the reluctant midwives of modernization. Political Islam, with its emphasis on discipline, asceticism, hard work and literacy, and its hostility to traditional Islam in the shape of the Sufi lodges, may also have similar cultural consequences.

Islam has been placed firmly on the agenda of modern sociology of religion by the crisis in international relations and the clash of civilizations. Political Islam is the consequence of the social frustrations resulting from the economic crises of the global neoliberal experiments of the 1970s and 1980s. The demographic revolution produced large cohorts of young Muslims, who, while often well educated to college level, could not find economic opportunities to satisfy the social aspirations that had been inflamed by the rise of nationalist governments in the period of de-colonization. Broadly speaking, we can identify four periods of Islamic political action in response to the social and cultural crises that were associated with foreign domination and civil struggles. These religious movements that have critically attacked contemporary political and military weakness appeal to the early community of the Prophet as a model of social order, and hence they have been labelled 'fundamentalist'. In the nineteenth century, these reformist movements which were hostile to both traditional folk religion and the external Western threat included Wahhabism in Arabia, the Mahdi in the Sudan, the Sanusis in North Africa, and the Islamic reform movements of Egypt. The second wave of activism came in the 1940s with the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the third movement began in the aftermath of the Arab defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. It reached a crescendo with the Iranian Revolution in 1978–9 and the Russian incursion into Afghanistan. The contemporary wave of resistance commenced with the Gulf War in 1990, when the presence of American troops on Saudi Arabian soil created the groundwork for the formation of Al-Qaeda networks.

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The most influential interpretation of political Islam has been developed by Gilles Kepel (2002) in his *Jihad*. His thesis is simply that the past 25 years have witnessed both the spectacular explosion of Islamism and its failure. In the 1970s, when sociologists

assumed that modernization meant secularization, the sudden irruption of political Islam, especially popular protests in Iran that were framed within Shi'ite theology, appeared to challenge dominant paradigms of modernity. These religious movements forced women to wear the *chador* and excluded them from public space. Although leftist intellectuals originally defined religious fundamentalism as religious fascism, Marxists came to realize that Islamism had a popular base and was a powerful force against colonialism. Western conservatives were attracted by Islamic preaching on moral order, obedience to God and hostility to impious materialists, namely communists and socialists.

We can interpret Islamism in sociological terms as the product of generational pressures and class structure. It has been embraced by the youthful generations of the cities that were created by the postwar demographic explosion of the Third World and the resulting mass exodus from the countryside. This generation was poverty-stricken, despite its relatively high literacy and access to secondary education, but Islamism also recruited among the middle classes – the descendants of the merchant families from the bazaars and souks who had been pushed aside by decolonization, and from the doctors, engineers and businessmen, who, while enjoying the salaries made possible by booming oil prices, were excluded from political power. At the local level the ideological carriers of Islamism were the young academics and students, who were recently graduated from technical and science departments and who were inspired by the Muslim ideologues of the 1960s. Islamic themes of justice and equality were mobilized against those regimes that were corrupt, bankrupt and authoritarian, and often supported by the Western governments in the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet empire.

Islamism has failed to fill that gap, and political Islam has been in decline since 1989, despite the dramatically successful attacks by Al-Qaeda on the United States in 2001. The political opponents of radical Islam have been able to exploit the divided class basis of the movement. For example, the fragile class alliance between the young urban poor, the devout middle classes and alienated intellectuals meant that Islamism was poorly prepared to cope with long-term and systematic opposition from state authorities. Over time governments found ways of dividing these social classes and frustrating the aim of establishing an Islamic state within which the religious law or *Shari'a* would have exclusive jurisdiction. Kepel considers the extreme and violent manifestations of

Islamism – the Armed Islamist Group in Algeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Al-Qaeda network – as evidence of its political disintegration and failure. This collapse was detonated by the military invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which was calculated to galvanize the Arab urban poor against the elites of the oil-rich states. The Iraqi attack destroyed the Islamic consensus that the Saudis had established, and the presence of American troops encouraged the growth of dissident Islamic groups in the Saudi kingdom and elsewhere. After the fall of Kabul in 1992, Muslim fighters were dispersed to other conflict regions such as Bosnia, Algeria and Egypt. In Bosnia they failed to insert Islamism successfully into the conflict – a political failure made evident by the Dayton Accords in 1995. In Algeria, extreme violence against civil groups cut off their popular support, and the Berber population remained hostile to Islam. In Egypt, while radical groups had assassinated Sadat, they were unable to sustain broad political support. In Afghanistan, the Taliban lost local and international support through its brutality towards women and opposition groups.

By 1997 there was growing evidence that support for radical Islamism was on the wane. Often with reference to human rights abuse and the need for democratization, the middle class and women's groups who had been targets of religious controls challenged the political dominance of the conservative mullahs and their followers. The election of President Mohammed Khatami in Iran with the support [p. 299 ↓ ] of the middle classes and a generation born after the revolution was achieved against the will of the religious establishment. In Indonesia, a secular president, B.J. Habibie, was elected to replace Suharto, who had fallen from office in 1998, having failed to cope with the financial crises that had undermined the currency. Habibie was ineffectual and indecisive, but he did not directly oppose the process of social and political reform. In Algeria, the new government of Abdelaziz Bouteflika included both secularists and moderate Islamist leaders. In Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf replaced Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who had supported the Islamist movement. In Turkey, the Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan was forced out of office, thereby breaking the precarious alliance between the middle classes and the radicalized young urban poor. Finally, in the Sudan, the Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi was forced out of office. For Kepel (2004), the terrorist attacks of 11 September and the Afghan war are further evidence of the political erosion of extremist Islamist movements, because Al-Qaeda has been unable to mobilize a mass movement behind its vision of a global religious war.

In its response to globalization, fundamentalism and the rise of political Islam, the sociology of religion has once more become a major field of study within contemporary sociology. In this chapter, I have concentrated on Christianity and Islam as examples of the fundamentalist challenge, but similar examples could have been taken from Judaism or from Hinduism. Paradoxically, this revival of sociological interest in religious movements has involved an intellectual return to its classical roots in Durkheim and Weber. I have argued that religion was important as an issue in classical sociology, because it posed interesting questions in relation to the growth of rational capitalism, but also because religion was politically important in relation to the rise of a radical working class. In the modern world, religion has become politically important as an active response to the secular implications of globalization. In the United States, Christian fundamentalism has become an important force in the revival of right-wing politics. In Israel, Jewish fundamentalism has played an important part in re-shaping secular politics, and political Islam has been a major conduit of social and political protest against both corrupt nationalist governments and Western dominance. These intellectual changes in research focus in response to global political developments have had the consequence of revitalizing the sociology of religion as an important component of contemporary sociology.

Bryan Turner

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