
The Sociotheological Turn

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THE SITUATION IS not all bad.

Yes, there is much to criticize in considering the way that some of the dominant trends in the social sciences do—and do not—deal with religion. In sociology and political science, there is a mad determination by those espousing some of the leading analytic paradigms to quantify everything and try to turn all hypotheses into statistically verifiable data. This economic model of the social sciences is bound to marginalize the religious dimensions of human communities. This is especially so in non-Western societies, where often religious beliefs, customs, and practices are more integrated with the social whole. What is frustrating is not just the willful misunderstanding of the role that religion plays in the social imaginary of people across the planet, especially in non-Western societies, but also the frequent refusal to see it at all.

Still, this is only part of the picture. There are also encouraging new developments, and these are the ones I want to underscore. I think there is a renewal of interest in religion, not only as a datum of social identity, but as something more. Increasingly, one finds studies that try to probe the religious dimensions of social worldviews. In my mind, this constitutes something new, a distinctive sociotheological turn in the social sciences.

I say this as someone who has certainly seen the dark side. I have studied religion from a social science perspective all of my academic career, and often felt marginalized as a result. While completing my PhD

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in political science at Berkeley, one of my advisors told me to drop the religion stuff, since “no one is interested in that sort of thing.” Years later, still at Berkeley but now as the coordinator of the religious studies program, I worked with Robert Bellah to create a graduate program in religion, and we were rebuffed by social scientists who informed us that “there was nothing of *wissenschaftlich* interest” in the study of religion, per se. Eventually, I found a genial home in a department of sociology.

But those who told me I had no future in studying religion from a social science perspective were not the only voices in the social sciences even then. And lately, there are encouraging signs that more and more sociologists and political scientists see the social significance of culture in general and of religion in particular.

Of course, one can claim that the study of religion was part of the social sciences from their beginning. Émile Durkheim attempted to immerse himself in the thinking of tribal societies to understand the socio-religious significance of totemic symbols (1915). Max Weber adopted a posture of *verstehen* in his social analysis that was sensitive to cultural values, and he integrated both theological ideas and social theory in his studies of the religions of India and China and in developing his understanding of the Protestant ethic (1905, 1915, 1916). Karl Marx took seriously the relationship of ideological frameworks of thought to social structure, especially in his analysis of the role of religion in the German peasant’s revolt (1939). Most of the sociological work on religion in the first half of the twentieth century, however, tended to be reductionist and unappreciative of the distinctiveness of religious ideas.

The trend began to turn in the second half of the twentieth century. By the beginning of the 1970s, the sociologist Roland Robertson could proclaim that a new departure in the field of sociology was developing that he dubbed “sociotheology.” What he had in mind was the kind of work done by Peter Berger in *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) and *The Sacred Canopy* (1969), and also by Robert Bellah in *Tokugawa Religion* (1957) and *Beyond Belief* (1970), in taking seriously the religious dimension of social reality. Theirs was a kind of sociology that not only studied religious things, but also the way social reality was perceived from a religious frame of reference.

Since then, there has been an explosion of interest in religion from a social scientific perspective. And these are studies that are not just positivist approaches to religious data, but take seriously the religious point of view. It will be worthwhile to take a moment to review some of these significant recent sociological accomplishments in the study of religion.

So strap yourself in. We are going on a wild ride through the field of contemporary sociotheology.

We might begin with the sociologists that Robertson had in mind, since they continued to be active up to this year. Berger has written on religion and globalization (2002) and interfaith dialogue (2011). Bellah published a massive book on the expanding capacity for religious activity and consciousness in human evolution (2011) and was working on a sequel when he died unexpectedly in July. Robertson, for that matter, has made significant contributions to the study of religion in a global age and, though a sociologist of religion, is regarded as an early scholar of globalization and one of the founders of the field of global studies.

Focusing on the role of religion in American society, perhaps the most trenchant recent work is by Princeton sociologist Robert Putnam, who explores the loss of religious and other forms of communal life in America in *Bowling Alone* (2000) and in more recent works (2012). It echoes a similar finding by Bellah and his team—sociologists Steven Tipton, Ann Swidler, William Sullivan, and Richard Madsen—who explored more explicitly the role of religion in American individualism in *Habits of the Heart* (1985). Bellah's earlier work on American civil religion is a vein that has been mined by many sociologists, including notably Philip Hammond.

Within the last several years, and closer to contemporary issues, Robert Wuthnow has published on the role of religion in the political culture of America's heartland in *Red State Religion* (2011). Wuthnow has also recently written on the global outreach of American churches and the religious searching of baby boomers. Baby boomer religion has also been the subject of two other fine sociologists of religion, Wade Clark Roof and Conrad Cherry. The role of churches in American life has been explored by Nancy Ammerman and R. Stephen Warner. Warner has analyzed the innovative aspects of new Christian congregationalism in America in *A Church of Our Own* (2005).

The new multiculturalism of American society has been the subject of studies by several sociologists, including Warner and Judith Wittner in *Gatherings in Diaspora* (1998). Stephen Prothero explores religious multiculturalism in *A Nation of Religions* (2006), and Peggy Levitt makes a major contribution to the study of multifaith religious communities of new American immigrants in *God Needs No Passport* (2009). Racial diversity in American religion is explored by the late Otto Maduro, Larry Mamiya, Dwight Hopkins, and others. And feminism in American religion is analyzed by Lynn Davidman, Carol Christ, Rita Gross, and others as well.

The emergence of new right-wing religious movements in the United States has been the subject of many studies, including notably Michael Barkun's examination of Christian Identity. The rise of new religious movements throughout the world is a subfield in itself, led by the late

Oxford sociologist Peter B. Clarke and the London School of Economics' Eileen Barker. In the United States, one of the leading sociologists in this field has been Catherine Wessinger.

Other recent sociological works have taken a broader span and looked at the role of religion in culture in general. Ann Swidler has focused on religion as an aspect of culture. Rodney Stark has taken a sociological view of the history of Christianity in several works, including the recent *The Triumph of Christianity* (2012). A useful compendium of essays on religion and American culture has been compiled by David Hackett (2003).

The rise of religious political ideologies as a challenge to secularism has been the occasion for the development of a new subfield in sociology on contesting religious and secular ideologies. Roger Friedland, Peter Van der Veer, and I have worked on religious nationalism. Philip Zuckerman has helped to develop the subfield of secularism studies. Jose Casanova has joined with the philosopher Charles Taylor and George McLean on a project on religious disjunctions in a secular age. Essays by Casanova, Taylor, Talal Assad, and sociologist Craig Calhoun, along with my essay, appear in the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)-sponsored volume, *Rethinking Secularism* (2011). An earlier SSRC project on the rise of transnational religious ideologies resulted in the volume *Transnational Religion and Fading States* (1996), edited by political scientists Susanne Rudolph and James Piscatori. Abdullahi An Naim has written about Islam and the secular state (2009) and Talal Asad has deconstructed the notion of the secular (1993, 2003).

Though much of the geographical focus of sociology is the United States and Europe, sociological studies are increasingly worldwide. Sociologist Richard Madden has worked on religion in contemporary China; Rosalind Hackett and Jacob Olupona focus on Africa; Said Arjomand, Saba Mahmood, and Saad Ibrahim on the Islamic world; and T. N. Madan, Gene Thursby, and the late M. N. Srinivas study religion in India. Madan's *Religion in India* (1993) not only covers the essentials of India's diverse religious traditions, but also explores central sociological themes regarding the relation of culture to social structure. Martin Riesebrodt's *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Modern Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (1998) compares the rise of two forms of religious patriarchy, and a more recent book by Riesebrodt looks at the rise of religious practice as a universal condition (2010).

And finally, there are sociological works that span the globe and raise fundamental questions about the study of religion in an era of globalization. Robertson was an early pioneer in this field, and Casanova some twenty years ago raised the issue of the resurgence of public religion in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994). The theme of globalization

is raised explicitly in Berger's introductory essay in *Many Globalizations* (2002), Peter Beyer's *Religions in Global Society* (2006), Jay Demereth's *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics* (2001), and in my own books, particularly *Terror in the Mind of God* (2003) and *Global Rebellion* (2008). Many of the essays in the *Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (2006) also approach global religion from a sociological perspective, particularly those by Said Arjomand on Islam, T. N. Madan on Hinduism, Wade Clark Roof on North American religion, Martin Riesebrodt on the rise of religion as a global phenomenon, and Roland Robertson on antiglobal religion.

In addition to this impressive list of sociologists who explore the religious dimensions of society, there is a strong new crop of political scientists who work on religion. I say this since, as I mentioned earlier, my own interests in religion were discouraged when I was a political science graduate student and virtually no one in political science at the time worked on religion. Now even my alma mater, Berkeley, has hired someone in the field of religion and politics—Ron Hassner, a fine young scholar who works on contested sacred space. Elsewhere, at Oxford and formerly at Harvard, Monica Toft Duffy works on ethnic and religious conflict, Dan Philpott focuses on the religious aspects of reconciliation and conflict resolution, Sohail Hashmi on Islamic religion and politics, and Timothy Shah on American evangelicals and the religious right. Elizabeth Hurd (2007) has done pioneering work on the study of religion in international relations, and Cecelia Lynch explores the religious aspects of transnational humanitarian organizations. The Luce Foundation has launched a significant initiative on religion in international affairs that funds religion-related research and curriculum projects in schools of international affairs. This has resulted in new tracks in religion in international affairs in several of these schools, and spurred research in the field. The subject of religion in political science is no longer the funny uncle that no one wants around.

What is significant about all of this social science productivity related to religion is not just its abundance but the kind of insights that it produces. I have mentioned only a selected fraction of the scholars and their work. Many of the others focus on religious institutions and activities as well, but as subjects of studies that fit into the conventional quantitative social science paradigms. What is interesting about all of the scholars and works that I have just mentioned is that they do not fit this quantitative mold. They ask large questions and are willing to step out of conventional social science paradigms to understand the religious dimensions of social perceptions and to explore religious worldviews.

This is why I think that Robertson's phrase "sociotheology" applies to this current momentum within sociology and kindred social sciences.

Like the “cultural turn” of recent decades in which social scientists rediscovered the importance of culture in social life, there seems to be a sociotheological turn as well. This “sociotheological turn” implies a correspondence between the social studies and religious thinking that has come as an alternative to more positivist approaches to analyzing social phenomena related to religion. Typically, social scientists have felt most comfortable by keeping theology and religious ideas at an arm’s length, and the sociotheological turn has provided exceptions.

Part of the reason for the interest in religion can be found in the daily news. Religion has become inescapably and often abrasively a part of public life. Militant movements such as the Taliban, messianic Zionists, and Christian abortion clinic bombers speak the language of religion and draw on religious myths, doctrines, and ideas to legitimate their political actions. Activists in the movements often present themselves as servants of God implementing a divine command. In India, Hindus and Sikhs have justified violence in defense of their religious faiths, and even Buddhism—a tradition for which nonviolence is its hallmark—has been fused with violence in political movements in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, and Tibet and in the activities of a new religious movement in Japan, the Aum Shinrikyo.

Though often the motives of these movements can be described in nonreligious terms—defending social identity, securing justice, and obtaining political order—they are simultaneously phrased in pious language and their goals are often stated in religious terms. Frequently, the personal spiritual mission of salvation is fused with a communal longing for a redemptive social order. Thus, these phenomena need to be analyzed from both religious and social perspectives. This means not only studying religious things, but trying to understand the religious dimensions of social realities. The movements of religious politics in recent years have also been regarded as interesting because they appear to challenge secularism as an ideology. This leads to an examination of the familiar Enlightenment notion that religion is something private and separate from the public secular realm.

For the social sciences, this sociotheological turn means incorporating into social analysis the insider-oriented attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview. As a result, the social sciences have recovered an appreciation for the insider’s perspective on religion. This is, after all, what the field of theology has classically been about, long before the advent of the modern academic disciplines, and is why the term “theology” is appropriately a part of the sociotheology term. Theology classically has attempted to structure the social, ethical, political, and spiritual aspects of a culture’s ideas and meanings into a coherent whole. It studies

what Michel Foucault once designated as an episteme: the structure of knowledge that is the basis of an understanding of how reality works (1969). These epistemic worldviews have traditionally been understood in language about ultimate reality that is today regarded as religious; it is the study of the essential moral and spiritual connections in all aspects of life. For a further explication of what I mean by sociotheology, and how it affects the scholarly approaches to religious subjects, see the essay on sociotheology that I have written with my colleague, Mona Sheik, in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (2013).

Suffice it to say that I regard many of the recent works on religion from a sociological perspective as sociotheological in that they take religious thinking seriously. But they also take the social contexts seriously. The scholars who have been working in the intellectual style that we call sociotheology realize that much of the phenomena that modern people since the time of the European Enlightenment have called religion are related to other aspects of society, from economic and political factors to matters of social identity. For this reason, sociotheological analysis seldom is limited to a study of religion in the narrow sense, as if there were a separate cluster of actions and ideas relating to a notion of transcendence and of spiritual transformation that was unaffected by other aspects of public and private life. Sociotheology, thus, represents a third way—a path between reductionism (denying that religion can have any “real” importance) and isolationism (delinking religion from its social milieu). Instead, this trend incarnates the analytic approach that Robert Segal calls interactionism—a two-way frame of references through which religion can account for social phenomena and social factors can account for religion (2005). Though in our modern way of thinking about religion, it is granted partial autonomy from the “secular” world, it is not given immunity from the society or culture in which it is a part.

Thus, despite the inadequacy of much of the social sciences to understand and appreciate the religious dimension of life, there is a large and vibrant community of social scientists who take religion seriously. This is an impressive and growing community of scholars who deserve to be appreciated, both for the value of their own distinctive work and for the collective impetus that they have given to social sciences’ current sociotheological turn.

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