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# Narrative versus Theory in the Sociology of Religion: Five Stories of Religion's Place in the Late Modern World

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NARRATIVE VERSUS THEORY IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION:

FIVE STORIES OF RELIGION'S PLACE IN THE LATE MODERN WORLD

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**Introduction**

To an outsider, the picture of religion provided by contemporary sociologists is a bit like

the famous elephant described by the five blind men. To listen to various observers,

religion is declining, expanding, changing its shape, changing its nature, or merely

responding to changed markets – all at once. Much of the professional literature in the past

two decades has been devoted to fights between the advocates of such views. Were one to

eliminate these set-tos, one might not have much left to read, other than slow-journalistic

descriptions of one or another religious group.

Some sociologists see religion in decline and tell us about its loss of influence in

daily affairs. Empty European churches, the relative decline of American mainline

denominations, and a biographic loss of religiosity on the part of many intellectuals give

this story much of its bite. Some tell an opposite story, one which sees religion becoming

increasingly "conservative" or "fundamentalistic".[1] A resurgent Islam certainly makes this

story plausible, as does the intrusion of American right-wing religion into national politics.

But these are only two views.

Other sociologists – especially American ones – see denominations shrinking but

independent congregations growing; their story talks about religious reorganization. Their

tale emphasizes the changing shape of religious institutions – something that indicates

neither decline nor fundamentalization. Still other sociologists see religion as increasingly a matter of personal choice – a *bricolage* by which individuals create meaningful lives for themselves at a time when they can no longer rely on social institutions. A fifth group thinks that both organizational change and personal choice have always been present. It focuses its story on the shape of the markets for religious "goods" in which such organizational and personal choices are made.

One might be tempted to see this surfeit of views as a sign of vitality and growth. After all, intellectual debates generate not only heat and light; they can also generate significant new research that expands the range of human knowledge. And there does seem to have been a lot of new empirical or quasi-empirical work in the last couple of decades. Those who see religion declining and those who see it responding to market forces trade data as well as diatribes. Those who note the rising salience of religious conservatism supply many facts to support their view. American sociologists have produced many new congregational studies, illustrating the central role that congregations now play in American religious life. Sociologists have also explored the ways in which individuals create their own religious meanings, separate from – though often embedded in – religious institutions. Each of these approaches highlights part of the elephant. The blind men (and women) use such data to squabble about which aspect of that elephant is most real.

The problem with this analogy is that it presumes that we, the audience, are not blind and can see the elephant for what it is. That makes the story memorable – and makes us laugh at its blind participants' foolishness. In reality, however, we are all "blind" – in the sense that we all lack a clear, independent view of religion and the direction in which it

is heading. We are in the same situation as the various blind combatants. We see no better than they do, and can thus not adjudicate their quarrel.

For example: one can interpret the membership declines of American liberal Protestant denominations as the result of growing secularization or as the result of growing religious conservatism. One can see them as a shift in the relative strength of denominations and congregations, or as a sign of growing religious individualism. Or one can see them as the result of these denominations' failure to deliver a religious product that appeals to consumers. The data itself do not help us decide. We cannot see the elephant as a whole.

What results, however, if we focus not on the elephant (which we cannot see, in any case) but instead focus on the blind speakers? What can we learn from the stories that they are telling us about religion in late modernity? This chapter will map out an approach to that question.

## Narratives and Discourses

The words "narrative" and "discourse" have become fashionable terms in many of the social sciences, with the striking exception of the sociology of religion. The famous "linguistic turn" seems to have sidestepped our field, at least the English-speaking part of it. Few sociological studies demonstrate the reflexive self-examination now *de rigueur* among anthropological ethnographers (Spickard and Landres, 2003). Though occasional theoretical pieces question the field's received concepts (Spickard, 1998b; Beckford, 2003; McGuire, 2005), none has yet applied the ideas developed by various discourse analysts to sociological discourse about religion.

Discourse analysts begin from the premise that humans chiefly comprehend the world through talk (see Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Talk purports to describe the world-as-it-is, but it simultaneously constructs that world in the sense that talk identifies what parts of the world are relevant and what parts are not for any particular undertaking. Collectively, we shape our own possibilities through language. These possibilities are not, of course, unlimited; merely talking about human flight will not, for example, enable us to soar with the birds, though it may encourage us to build aircraft. It takes talk to do that, however. In the words of two prominent discourse analysts, in a book on New Zealand racism:

> New Zealand is no less real for being constituted discursively – you still die
>
> if your plane crashes into a hill, whether you think that the hill is the product
>
> of a volcanic eruption or the solidified form of a mythical whale. However,
>
> material reality is no less discursive for being able to get into the way of
>
> planes. How those deaths are understood […] and what caused them is
>
> constituted through our systems of discourse. (Wetherell and Potter,
>
> 1992:62)

Language is especially important to scholars. Whatever else we academics do, we create and shape concepts in language, carrying them forth to the world in our lectures and our writings. Viewed socially, we are what 1960s radicals used to call "culture workers": our activity is part of the process by which peoples and societies come to understand themselves, their presents, pasts, and potential futures. Some among us, to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrase, help shape the "imagined communities" that we call nations. Others of us talk about the natural world, telling our (collective) selves about its potential.

This potential changes as we "discover" new things, but social rules govern such discoveries – or at least govern how we decide to accept them as "real". (The intellectual activity that we call "philosophy of science" is in fact a long conversation about what counts as "discovery" and what counts as justification for accepting some discoveries and rejecting others.)

Like other scholars, sociologists of religion do not engage with their subject raw. Instead, we take part in a society-wide conversation about "religion" – a conversation that we help shape but that also shapes our shapings. Formally, we take part in disciplinary conversations, but we would be naïve were we to imagine that the wider social conversation does not influence the narrower. The sociology of religion lives in symbiotic relationship with various universities, foundations, granting agencies, churches, and governments. We tell them what they should be interested in and they tell us what they will give us money to explore. The trends that periodically sweep through the discipline are thus not entirely autogenetic. They stem in good part from researchers finding new funding to explore new religious avenues. Note, however, who has the most power to determine these directions: were society-at-large to cease being interested in "religion", then these various agencies would cease paying people to produce words about it, no matter what we told them they should do. The sociology of religion would become like the studies of Old English, Greek, or Latin have become in American technical schools: a matter of historical interest to a few elderly souls on the margins of intellectual life.

This has not happened, in part because of religion's continued social relevance and in part because there is an external market for words about it. Other professionals also talk about religion – ministers and politicians, to name just two – and our words both feed and

feed on theirs.  Our social prominence enhances theirs, and vice versa, all through the medium of language.

Words alone do not generate conversations, however, and more than simple "facts" move scientists.  Humans can understand words and facts, but they are more often moved by stories.  That is, concepts garner more attention when set in the context of a narrative: a who-what-when-where-why that tells us what individual words and "facts" mean.  Such narratives orient us to these facts.  They tell us why the facts matter.  Indeed, some observers argue that ordering one's life around stories is a central aspect of the human condition (Bruner, 1991; Sarbin, 1986).

A simple thought-experiment makes this clear.  Imagine, for a moment, that you are trying to convey a set of church membership figures to an audience.  Just listing the figures is not very useful, because even the mathematically inclined will have trouble remembering them.  If one locates them in a story, however, they are more likely to be understood.  Which story does not matter; you could use them to talk about religion's rise, its decline, or its constancy.  Your audience will first remember the story, and then will remember the figures as evidence for it.

Lyotard (1984) argues that science itself is merely robust storytelling.  Scientists tell stories with their data and argue with one another about those stories' significance.  Yes, there are rules (though contested ones) about what counts as a "scientific" story and about what kinds of stories can be used to explain what kinds of data.  In this, however, science is no different than other human endeavors, such as politics, art, and philosophy.  As Wittgenstein famously put it, each human activity – including science – involves a "language game".  Lyotard, Bruner, and others note that narratives are central to most, if

not all, of these "games". The question is not whether one can avoid stories; the question is which particular stories inhabit an intellectual field at a given time, and how those stories shape the work of the scholars that dwell there.

The fact that science calls such stories "theories" is irrelevant here.[2] In fact, the concept "theory" takes much of its power from meta-narrative that claims "the scientific method" as the ultimate arbiter of knowledge. Discourse analysis emphasizes the constructedness of all narratives, including this one. It argues that good story-telling is a central part of any theory's appeal.

This is a different attitude toward the relationship between science and fact than is contained in Kuhn's (1970) famous view that science is driven by "paradigms". These are constellations of ideas and practices that privilege one or another scientific theory based on the consensus of working scientists. In Kuhn's view, a "pre-paradigmatic" science is one that has not achieved consensus; "paradigm shifts" occur when the reigning paradigm leaves too many matters unexplained. Sociologists have frequently wondered whether our discipline is pre-paradigmatic or in the midst of one or another shift; to us, at least, our lack of consensus seems to need explaining.

Kuhn's approach is at root a narrative about scientific history and about the various stages through which that history typically goes. It is an intellectual frame, and like all frames it shapes the data that it lets one see. If one wants to be scientific, this narrative or frame tells us, one can expect paradigm conflict, but one also expects that conflict to resolve itself into a new disciplinary consensus. Thus, prominent sociologists of religion have talked about "new paradigms" in the social study of religion (Warner, 1993; Stark and Finke, 2000) and have promised a shift from one theoretical consensus to another.

"Secularization R.I.P", writes one (Stark, 1999) – as if the "death" of one misportrayed story promised the dominance of another.

Viewed from the outside, there looks to be a whole lot of framing going on here. Were Kuhn's narrative accurate, one would ultimately expect some settlement to the paradigm conflict – a settlement that is nowhere in sight. Moreover, at least some of the candidate paradigms owe their appeal to wider societal discourses. Rational choice views, for example, parallel a widespread neo-liberal assault on notions of collective social responsibility that has naturalized individualism as the heart of American economic and political life (Sen, 2003). Narratives that emphasize a growing religious individualism tap both this discourse and remnants of the counter-cultural "do your own thing" ideology of the late 1960s, albeit with different political allegiances. That is to say, these stories of religion's future are at least parallel to, and are perhaps offshoots of, wider social discourses. Can a discourse become a paradigm? Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), and perhaps other kinds (Potter, 1996; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), would say "No" – not if "science" is to mean anything more than whatever the dominant players in an intellectual field say it is. Discourse analysis is designed to expose the power relations embedded in social narratives – a task that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

Formal discourse analysis relativizes human knowledge in two senses. First, it locates individual talk in the midst of social conversations, noting that these conversations ("discourses") shape ideas in ways unconscious to the participants. Second, it highlights the processes by which talk is produced and consumed, exploring the ways that this social organization of talk shapes talk's content. Both depend on a clear exposition of the various

narratives found in a given field. Of these three tasks, I have space here only to begin the last.

So, how do sociologists of religion currently talk about "religion" and its place in the later modern world? The discipline is dominated by five such narratives, which the following section will describe.[3]

**Five Narratives**

*Secularization*

The story of secularization has a long and proud tradition in sociology – as throughout modern Western intellectual life. Comte, Marx, Weber, and Freud all famously thought that prior ages were more religious than would be the future. In fact, the idea that "religion is not what it once was" has considerable empirical support. To take just the United States: American religious organizations have nowhere near the social influence that they had two centuries ago, and observers have documented a steady drop in mainline Protestant church membership, stretching back to the 1950s. Young American evangelicals increasingly disagree with their churches' moral stances, though not on all matters. Religious intermarriage is on the rise all across the religious spectrum. The majority of Jews no longer attend synagogue; Roman Catholic church attendance has fallen by one-fourth since 1965. An increasing number of Americans claim be irreligious. In sum, religion is a smaller part of American life, both public and private, than it once was. Europe has seen an even steeper religious decline.

I need look no further than my wife's family for a good illustration of this. Her grandparents were Biblical literalists who believed in "the Rapture" – that at the End of

Times good Christians would be taken up bodily to Heaven, leaving the unrighteous behind them. Her father tells the story of coming back from school as a small child to find no one home – unheard of in a farming family. He assumed that the Rapture had come and that he was one of those who had not been saved. As an adult, he left this group and became a liberal Presbyterian. His children and grandchildren are uniformly secular, even mocking the "true believers" from their family's past.

The secularization tale has several versions. One version emphasizes the fragmentation of social life, as specialized roles and institutions are created to handle specific tasks that were formerly churches duties. Another version notes that, almost everywhere in the modern world, small-scale communities have lost power to large-scale organizations; religion, so often tied up with the life of the local community, has suffered that community's erosion. Yet another version traces religious decline to increased pluralism; people are more likely to question their own beliefs when confronted with others' unlike views. Whatever the claimed cause, all of these stories predict that religion will fade.

*The "Good Old Way"*

This is not, however, the only story about religious change. The events of September 11th, 2001, challenged the secularization narratives in some rather basic ways. The terrorists, for example, were not uneducated yahoos, defending an old-time religiosity. They were educated zealots who saw themselves as holy fighters, bringing Islam into a new era (Juergensmeyer, 2001). The same can be said of Palestinian suicide bombers; Jewish ultra-

orthodox settlers are cut from the same mold, as are middle-class American right-wing Christians.

Unlike its popular image, this "fundamentalism" is not a backwoods phenomenon. The new conservatives embrace education but carefully control it. They harness the new media to spread their message. They see themselves as a bulwark against a world gone wrong, and they aim, in various ways, to set it right. At the extreme, some insist that religious law should govern everyday life and that it should do so for others, not just for themselves. Jenkins (2002) argues that this is the wave of the future for Christianity; other commentators chart its rise in for other faiths. Religious people, so the story goes, have rejected the roles that modernity sets before them.

On examination, this narrative lumps disparate groups together under a label that hides as much as it reveals. Some of these people seek personal salvation through religious discipline; others seek a religion that disciplines society, purging it of its ills. Though most such self-styled conservatives often preach a return to the "good old days", when everyone was supposedly holy and religion supposedly provided a firm rudder through the storms of life, their actual outlook is not so backward. The mere fact that many harness the latest media to proclaim their message belies their claim to resist all change.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, the "rise of fundamentalism" story is powerful. It runs roughly as follows. First, it acknowledges modernity's secularizing tendencies. It says, however, that these affect only a minority of the world's people, especially the left-liberal intelligentsia that controls the Western levers of power. Self-styled "conservative" religion arises, the story claims, in two places. It appears where modernity disrupts people's traditional ways of life – as a revitalization movement giving

people new identities with which to manage their changed circumstances (Barber, 1995). Becoming fundamentalist (or pentecostal or ultra-orthodox or hyper-Moslem) allows one to express one's opposition to change while making some sort of change possible.

The story speaks of a second origin, however, one more personally than socially focused. It starts from the Durkheimian insight that modern society has different rules, and fewer rules, than do traditional societies. One thing that unites all of the world's various fundamentalisms is their reverence for rules – from the Southern Baptist prohibition on dancing to the Jewish dietary codes to the complex Moslem Sharia, known for its draconian punishments. In this view, such fundamentalisms are, among other things, bulwarks against *anomie*. Faith sustains some people as much by of what it prohibits as by what it promises.

The story of the rise of fundamentalism, then, is as connected to the social processes underlying modernity as is the secularization narrative. The secularization story reads the decline of religion from modernity's increased division of labor, from its emphasis on the national rather than on the local community, from its emphasis on the individual, and from its pluralism. The "rise of fundamentalism" story reads religion's rise as a reaction to modernity's destruction of traditional life and to the rule-less nature of the modern world. In essence, the story goes, "conservative" religion is a matter of identity. It provides a firm grounding for those who distrust a world gone mad.

*Religious Reorganization*

The two preceding narratives describe religious decline and religious rise. Our third narrative speaks of religion's changing shape. Specifically designed to explain American

religious trends, it claims that although religion is weakening on the national level, it is more important than ever on the local level.

American churches have long been organized as local congregations. Except for the earliest colonial years, there was no state church, so religion was voluntary. Americans joined and left churches for the many personal reasons that people have for doing anything. And for the most part, their choices depended on a local congregation's ability to meet their religious needs.

The same is true today: Americans join religious groups, not so much on the basis of a denominational "brand" loyalty as on a sense of connection with a local congregation. Finding "the right" community is less a matter of matching the group's theology to individual beliefs than it is a matter of finding a congregation whose social patterns one finds congenial. "Church shopping" is a common practice when people move to a new town. Typically, "friendliness" is high on the list; theology appears much lower down, if at all.

Such congregations are increasingly central to American religious life. Hidden beneath the membership declines of the big denominations is the rise of independent congregations, small and large, which attract increasing numbers of adherents. From congregations made up of a few families to mega-churches with membership into the thousands, these groups often do not affiliate with the established national organizations. Instead, they welcome all comers, play down theological distinctiveness, and focus on providing a warm community.

This community takes many forms, as recent congregational ethnographies show. Some of these have focused on immigrants, showing how congregations give new

immigrants both a connection with their former countries and a toehold in America. If the

reorganization narrative is right, such cases are not just properties of immigrant religion,

but of American religion in general. Why might religious localism be so important today?

An obvious possibility is that it is part of a response to the increasing power of large-scale

institutions in late-modern life. As governments, big industries, and big commerce expand

their reach, individuals may retreat to localism as a haven in a difficult world. The

religious congregation stands alongside family and friends in offering personal support and

close social ties. As the growth of a mass society makes such personal connections all the

more important, religion – in its local manifestation – becomes increasingly significant.

In any event, the religious reorganization story tells us that religious decline on the

national level do not add up to a decline of local religion. In fact, it tells us to expect an

expansion of localism in all of its forms.

*Religious Individualization*

A fourth narrative also speaks of religious restructuring, but this time it is a shift in the

locus of religion from organizations to individuals. The story says that individuals now

pick from various religious options, crafting a custom-made religious life, rather than

choosing a package formulated by any religious hierarchy.

The story goes like this. In the past, religions were centered on churches. People's

membership in one or another church pretty much predicted their beliefs and actions, in

part because they had been socialized into following their church's institutional package.

One could expect a Catholic to believe in the Trinity, attend Mass, to venerate the saints,

and to eat fish on Fridays; one could expect a conservative Baptist to read the Bible daily,

to proof-text, to believe in personal salvation, and to avoid dancing and drink. The same held for other groups.

That was the past. The religious present, says this narrative, is much different. Where once most individuals accepted what their leaders told them, today they demand the right to decide for themselves. This goes for their core beliefs as well as for the details. And they do not feel compelled to switch religious communities when their religious views change.

A good deal of evidence supports this story. Not only do individuals today not generally believe everything that their church leaders tell them they should, but members of many churches display a diversity of religious beliefs and practices that formerly would have been defined as heresies. In her study of a mainline Presbyterian women's Bible study group, for example, Davie (1995) found a vast array of beliefs, many of them specifically opposed by that denomination's core creeds. Yet, individuals in the group – including clergy – found these beliefs very meaningful, even central to their individual religious views, and they supported each other's religious individuality. McGuire's (1988) study of non-medical healing found a similar religious eclecticism, as did my own (unpublished) study of a liberal Episcopalian congregation and Roof's (1993) study of American Baby Boomers. The situation among Catholics is a bit different, though the Catholic social activists that I have studied have gone even further in defining their own faith; the most radical of them see themselves – not the hierarchy – as the carriers of authentic Catholic tradition (McGuire and Spickard, 2003).

The religious individualism narrative sees both these Protestant and Catholic developments as examples of the growing autonomy of religious believers. Individuals

now construct their faiths out of many disparate elements, not limited to one tradition. This is not just an American phenomenon. In France, for example, Hervieu-Léger (1986) shows how individuals no longer feel the need to conform themselves to the established churches, but instead practice "religion *à la carte*" – a *bricolage* in which institutionally validated beliefs are less and less important in individual lives. In sum, there is as much evidence supporting this narrative as there is for the others I have discussed.

*Rational-Choice "Theory" of Religious Markets*

A fifth religious narrative begins with the idea that churches do not exist in social isolation; instead, they compete for "customers" in religious "markets." Those markets may consist of hundreds of competing "firms" – small churches each trying to attract members. Or they may consist of one or a few large churches that hold a national or local religious monopolies. Postulating that the "demand" for religious "goods" is nearly always constant, the religious market story claims that the dynamics of religious life are merely a special case of the dynamics of all market behavior. Religious consumers, like other consumers, rationally seek to maximize their benefits. If one knows something about the characteristics of religious "firms" and the applicable religious market structure, one can predict any specific religious future.

The most prominent application of this method is Finke and Stark's (1992) survey of American church history. Creatively using church membership statistics, the authors trace the rise and fall of several U.S. Protestant denominations over the last 200 years. They attribute the successive dominance of Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and various sectarians to their changing ability to market religion to the masses. This version of

the story is two pronged. First, religious freedom increases overall religious participation. Second, "successful" (i.e.: growing) churches are otherworldly and conservative.

Here is the logic: Where there are religious monopolies, only a small proportion of consumers get the product they want; with religious freedom, churches can cater to all kinds. Not everyone wants a metaphysical religion, but some people do; they will stay away from church unless a deregulated market gives them access to their kind of worship. The same is true for biblical literalists, mystics, Wiccans, and the ritualistic: a religious free-market increases the total supply of religious "goods", increasing the trade in religion overall. (This supposedly explains Europe's religious decline, because state churches have long dominated the European scene.)

At the same time, the majority of people want an "old-time religion" that promises salvation and sure answers. Churches decline if they try to appeal to a liberal elite rather than to the conservative plebes. Stark and Finke (2000) claim that their analysis of church membership trends shows a cross-cultural preference for supernaturalistic religions that offer a vision of a "life beyond." Both historical and contemporary data provide some support for this conclusion.

Like most economistic narratives, this one claims that macro-level religious changes result from independent actions by free individuals. The narrative's proponents apply a relatively simple version of rational-choice theory to describe how people make religious decisions. Among the more interesting results of this application is the prediction that high-demand churches are strong precisely because they ask so much of their members (Iannaccone, 1994). Such churches discourage free-riders; thus the benefits resulting from members' effort is not eaten up by others. Religiously committed sectarians get a rather

large reward for their participation, compared to the religiously committed who belong to more liberal groups.  Despite greater "costs", the benefit-to-cost ratio is higher.

This narrative has made a loud intellectual splash in the recent years, and has generated many cogent critiques and vigorous ripostes.  Part of its strength comes from its simplicity; another part comes from the popularity of economistic arguments in many contemporary social sciences.  Another part surely comes from the sheer volume of output by its principle supporters, several of whom too often misrepresent their critics.  For example, my own demonstration (1998a) of the empirical falsity of two of the three principles that underlie the narrative's rational choice claims (and the vacuity of the third) has nowhere been rebutted.  As I pointed out there, no real theory can survive having its underpinnings falsified – but there is a possibility that the rational-choice vision of religious markets is not a theory, but a model.  Models try to replicate the outcomes of social (and other processes), rather than describing their inner workings.  Just as no one expects a chess-playing computer to "think" like a chess grandmaster – even if the computer can beat the human at chess – so the results of a rational-choice model of religious growth and decline may match the actual growth and decline of various religious groups, even though the purported mechanisms are not operating.[4]

Narrative theory predicts that a story told often enough is more often believed.  This seems to be the case with the "religious markets" tale.  This simple story – for that is its strength – is extremely popular among younger sociologists.  Perhaps this supports Kuhn's tale, which includes the proposition that paradigms only change when the proponents of the old paradigms die or retire.  Just as likely, however, it shows how narratives are as influential among intellectuals as they are among other people.  In any event, the rational-

choice narrative of religious markets is a fixture on the contemporary landscape.  No account of religious narratives can pass it by.

**Sociology as Discourse**

So: we have the five narratives that dominate sociology of religion today.  These are not the only stories that sociologists tell, but they are the most prominent.  Had I space to pursue the matter, how might a discourse analysis proceed?

Methods differ, but Fairclough's "critical discourse analysis" is among the most fruitful.  It operates on three levels.  First, it analyzes narratives internally, to learn about their structure, their rhetorical appeal, and so on.  Second, it explores the "discursive practices" that surround them – in this case, by examining the ways in which scholarly narratives are produced and consumed.  Among other things, it would note how convincing stories generate social status for their authors, and what social pressures would lead readers (often students) to repeat the stories that they have learned.  Third, it connects each narrative to the common narratives of a given era, showing their joint implications for wider social practices.

Let's leave the first and third levels to imagination.  On the second level, I note a bit of old "news": scientists gain status (and students) by putting forth successful "theories".  Theories are supposed to be falsifiable, but theory-building has more status than theory testing.  Paradigm-building has the most status of all, which may encourage scholars to claim paradigmatic status for their favorite narratives.  Status certainly leads them to proclaim theoretical advances.

Yet, there have been few convincing tests of the aforementioned five stories and fewer still that have convinced the various protagonists to switch sides.   Something more powerful than mere reason is surely involved.  As an exercise in the sociology of intellectual life, I propose – as a theory – that narrative imagination plays a key role in the ways that scholars describe religion in society.  Like the men and the elephant, each of our blind disciplinary colleagues tells us a story about what is happening to religion in the contemporary world, a story that shapes both what is told and what counts as empirical support for that telling.  These narratives appeal to scholars, but they also appeal to – and generate research funding from – outsiders who respond as much to a given narrative's appeal as they do to the supposed evidence for it.

It strikes me that discourse analysis might here expose the social grounding of sociologists' own intellectual enterprises.

**Notes**

[1] The term "fundamentalism" is misleading, as I shall note below.  For now, let it stand as a shorthand for a self-proclaimed return to imagined religious roots and/or imagined purity.

[2] I differ here with Beckford (2003), who – despite his social constructionist approach – takes for granted the scientific meta-narrative.  As will be obvious below, I also sort the field's dominant narratives differently than does he – a difference that is crucial to neither of our enterprises.

[3] I have explored four of these narratives in greater detail in Spickard and McGuire (2002).  Because my space here is limited, I have eliminated almost all references; please see that text for more details.

[4] By the time this chapter is published, I expect to have finished writing a computer simulation that uses rational-choice postulates to create a model for religious growth and decline. We shall see whether model's output matches the narrative's predictions.

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