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WHAT IS HAPPENING TO RELIGION?
SIX SOCIOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

by

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ABSTRACT

This article sorts recent approaches in the sociology of religion into six groups, each of which tells a different story about what is happening to religion in the late-modern world. One, the secularization narrative, sees religion in decline. A second narrative tracks a rise of “fundamentalisms” worldwide. A third notes that religion is becoming local, especially in the United States. A fourth argues that religion is becoming individualized, both in Europe and worldwide. A fifth narrative claims that religion is alive and well, but only in competitive religious “markets”. And a sixth explores the changes religion undergoes in the process of globalization. Each of these narratives reads evidence through different lenses.

The sociology of religion has lately become a complicated discipline—especially when scholars try to describe the present and predict the future. Where sociologists’ reflections on European and American developments once led them to see religion as a declining force, they now lack consensus. Some continue to highlight religion’s wane—or at least its loss of influence in one social sphere after another. Others celebrate what they call a new paradigm, arguing that religion’s institutional strength depends on the structure of religious “markets”. Still others claim that religion is alive and well, but has left the churches for private life. A fourth set claims that religion has changed its institutional shape, particularly in the United States, where national denominations have weakened but local churches are still strong. A fifth group charts the rise of “fundamentalisms” in America, Europe, and beyond, from the Christian Right to militant Islam and the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (India’s main ethnic nationalist political force). Finally, several scholars have recently focused on religious globalization—the process by which religious values, ideas, and institutions change their shape in tune with an increasingly interconnected world.

I have written this article to describe these sociological approaches. I shall not judge between them, nor shall I try to merge them into a single story—a tempting response to a situation that exhibits some distinct blind-men-and-the-elephant qualities.¹ Instead, I shall relate six sociological narratives, stories that sociologists tell their readers (and each other) about what is happening to religion in the contemporary world. My core claim is that the sociologists of religion are no longer arguing over a single account of religion’s place in the contemporary world. Instead, we can best comprehend our current disciplinary conflict as a clash between six distinct stories about “What is happening to religion?” today and in the years to come.

I use the words “story”, “account”, and “narrative” deliberately here, instead of “paradigm,” “theory,” or any other scientific-sounding word. I do so because scholars, like other people, are led by their imaginations. They do not ignore data, but isolated data do not make sense all by themselves. Facts only make sense when imbedded in a story that gives them meaning. The membership declines of American mainline Protestant denominations, for example, can be interpreted as the result of growing secularization or as the result of increased sectarianism. They can be seen as a shift in the relative strength of denominations and congregations, or as a sign of growing religious individualism, or as the result of these denominations’ failure to deliver

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¹ The humor of this famous joke depends on our being able to see the whole elephant, which the blind men cannot. Scholarly conflicts are rarely settled by appeal to superior vision, because there is no guarantee that any viewpoint—even a supposedly synthetic one—can see the whole.

a religious product that appeals to American consumers. Or, they can reflect all of these, set in the context of a worldwide order in which religion both responds to and shapes such forces on a global scale.

Facts alone do not tell us which of these stories is correct. Getting from data to narrative requires an imaginative leap: the discernment of a pattern that makes various data hang together. Most scholarly conflicts arise from different leaps, not from different facts. In this sense, science itself amounts to robust storytelling (Lyotard 1984). Like other talk, scientific talk constructs the very world that it purports to describe. We scholars grasp religion through talk, not independently of it, so the shape of that talk should be an important topic of scholarly conversation. As Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter write in another context:

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 in 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)

Like New Zealand, religion is real and real things are happening to it, but our scholarly descriptions understanding of such matters is constituted through the words we use. Six main narratives currently dominate the sociology of religion: each answers differently our questions about religion’s present and about its future. Thematized in what follows as secularization, the rise of politicized sectarianism, religious reorganization, religious individualization, supply-side market analysis, and globalization, these narratives tell us quite different things about religious life. Though not always contradictory, these six approaches interpret data about religion in different ways. In doing so, each tells a different story about religion’s place in the modern world.

At the very least, my essay constitutes a sorting scheme that I hope will bring some order to our current scholarly confusion.

Secularization

The story of secularization has a long and proud tradition in sociology—as throughout modern Western intellectual life. Comte (1854), Marx (2002), Weber (1905/1920), and Freud (1927) all famously thought that prior ages were more religious than would be the future. Their reasons were different, of course. Marx argued that religion helped poor people endure the pain of their oppression—an opiate that they would not need in the class-free society to come. Weber claimed that the ideals that had motivated the early Protes-

tant reformers had lost their religious content, yet lived on as an “iron cage”² of rational self-repression that compelled modern folks to work hard at their professions without hope of transcendent reward. Freud saw religion as an illusion that would vanish as humanity matured.

Though based largely on European developments, the idea that “religion is not what it once was” has considerable empirical support, even in the United States—that most religious of developed countries. There, mainline Protestant church membership has declined since the 1950s. American religious organizations have nowhere near the social influence that they had two centuries ago, neither in public life nor over their own members. 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. In sum, religion is a smaller part of American life, both public and private, than it once was (see Roof and McKinney 1987, Davidman forthcoming, Greeley 1990, McNamara 1992).

Europe has seen an even steeper religious decline. In Britain, membership dropped from 30% to 14% of the adult population between 1900 and 1990. Aberdeen, Scotland’s weekly attendance fell from 60% of the population in 1851 to 11% of the population in 1995. Sunday attendance in the Nordic countries now amounts to something less than 2% of the adult population. Half a world away, Australian church attendance is as low as 5% for Anglicans and Presbyterians, though it is higher for sectarian groups. As Steve Bruce (1999: 7-8) recently put it:

The road from religion embodied in the great European cathedrals to religion as personal preference and individual choice is a road from more to less religion. From the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century, religion in Europe (and its offshoot settler societies) has declined in power, prestige, and popularity.

This is the narrative underlying the secularization view. Once socially central, contemporary religions are now largely voluntary organizations, a declining part even of private life.³

I need look no further than my wife’s family for a good illustration of this. Her father’s parents were Biblical literalists who believed in “the Rapture”—that at the End of Times good Christians would be taken up bodily to

² Or “stahlhartes Gehäuse”—the term that Max Weber actually used. See Peter Baehr (2001).

³ This narrative is clearly Eurocentric; it could not have developed in Japan, for example, where religion has played a much different social role than it has in the West.

Heaven, leaving the unrighteous behind them. Her father tells the story of coming home 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.

I do not have space to explore it here, but 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. The Welfare Office has replaced the Poor Box, the psychologist has replaced the pastoral counselor, the hospital corporation has replaced the church-run hospice. Though Poor Boxes, pastoral counselors, and the like remain, they do not dominate their professions as they once did (see Dobbelaere 2002).

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. It cannot compete with national television, sports, politics, and other forms of mass entertainment. Bryan Wilson (1982: 154ff) called this “societalization” and claimed that it constitutes an important social trend.

Then there is the decline in individual religious belief. Many, perhaps most, erstwhile members of American churches cannot name those churches’ central doctrines. Recent research has shown that the number of Americans claiming “no religion” has doubled over the last decade. Although Andrew Greeley has demonstrated a difference between Catholic and Protestant religious imaginations, almost no religious group can command doctrinal uniformity. It is no longer news that what is preached from the pulpit often bears little resemblance to what is believed in the pews (Roof 1999, Hout and Fischer 2002, Greeley 1989).

According to the secularization narrative, pluralism is one chief cause of this decline in religious belief. The modern world brings together many people with many different views—unlike previous times, in which people were surrounded by people of like faith and, thus, not likely to question their own group’s beliefs. The “growing pluralism” version of the secularization narrative tells us that religions are threatened by the presence of multiple views of the world (Berger 1969). It suggests that, where worldviews coexist and compete as plausible alternatives to each other, the credibility of all is undermined.

Structural differentiation, societalization, privatization, and the decline of belief are just four of the many versions of the secularization narrative. All versions predict that religion will fade.

The Rise of “Fundamentalisms”

This is not, however, the only story that tells us 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 (Juergensmeyer 2001). They were educated zealots who saw themselves as holy fighters, bringing Islam into a new era. 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. The secularization narrative predicted none of these religious revivals—all of which share some very similar attitudes.

Let’s take the case of Luke, a fundamentalist friend of mine. Luke is the perfect example of a contemporary extreme evangelical Christian. A well-educated doctor, he sees the world through Biblical lenses. His mission in life, as he sees it, is to spread the gospel. He does not do so by force, but by quiet conversation. Besides talking with other Americans, he goes to Guatemala each year on mission, where he spreads both free health care and God’s word.

Engaging and open, Luke nonetheless holds some quite extreme views, including a belief in the Bible’s literal truth. Among other things, he home-schools his eight children, preferring that they not engage with the sinful society in which they live. He and his wife uphold a very traditional division of labor and are pleased that their eldest daughter chose to do the same when she married young. He thinks that mainstream religions are too lax—that they have lost their way in a world of temptation. Above all, he sees salvation as coming only through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He worries about salvation for others but is assured of his own.

Luke is not alone in American life. Middle-class extreme evangelicals are now—and have been for several decades (Kelley 1972)—the fastest growing group on the American religious scene. Unlike the fundamentalism of the 1920s, this is not a backwoods phenomenon. These new fundamentalists embrace education but carefully control it. They harness the new media to spread their message. They see themselves as bulwarks against a world gone wrong, and they aim, each in their own ways, to set it right.

African Christian fundamentalists and pentecostals are much the same. Drawn from the most educated on that continent, these religious “conservatives” believe precisely those things that the secularization narrative says are most implausible in the modern world. This includes a belief in Biblical literalism, the coming apocalypse, the aforementioned “Rapture”, and the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. (Jenkins 2002) Jewish ultra-orthodox and Muslim “fundamentalists” take their religion’s core texts equally seriously. In fact, they both insist that religious law should govern everyday life and

that it should do so for others, not just for themselves. They, too, are far from uneducated. They have, in fact, rejected the roles that modernity sets before them and have chosen fundamentalist identities for themselves.

The narrative that I have been relating, the story that says that religion is becoming more fundamentalistic, is a common one among journalists and political scientists. It is not so common among sociologists or scholars of religion, for at least two reasons. First, not all of these groups are “fundamentalists”—at least in the technical sense (cf Marty and Appleby 1991). True fundamentalists adhere to “The Fundamentals”, a specific evangelical Protestant theology that focuses on Biblical literalism, the Rapture, and so on. A Muslim or Hindu cannot be a fundamentalist, in this sense. Second, the narrative lumps disparate groups together under a label that hides as much as it reveals. Some of the people it tries to describe 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 religion supposedly provided a firm rudder through the storms of life, they willingly harness the latest technology to proclaim their message.

What unites these tendencies, Christian and non-Christian, personalistic and socially active, is their sectarianism. All of these groups meet the classic definition of sectarians: people who reject “the world” as evil and who believe that their religion is the sole repository of truth. The secularization story told us that this kind of religion would disappear with the spread of an urbanized, functionally differentiated society. The “rise of fundamentalism” story gains its plausibility from the fact that it has not. Quite the opposite: contemporary sectarians have become politically active on several continents. Their rejection of “the world” has moved from a withdrawal to a political attack—one that, presumably, is aimed at social reformation.

We might therefore rename this story “the rise of politicized sectarianism” and tell it as follows. First, this story acknowledges modernity’s secularizing tendencies, but it says that these affect only a minority of the world’s people—notably the left-liberal intelligentsia that (sectarians imagine) controls the Western levers of power. Politicized sectarianism 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. Becoming fundamentalist (or pentecostal or ultra-orthodox or hyper-Muslim) allows one to express one’s opposition to such social change while making some sort of accommodation possible. Anthropologists have long been familiar with such revitalization movements (Wallace 1956, 1970); the new versions are just harder to hide on society’s margins.

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 Muslim Sharia, known for its draconian punishments. In this view, such fundamentalisms are, among other things, bulwarks against *anomie*. They provide rules for those who are uncomfortable without them. This matches my friend Luke’s situation, something that he would willingly admit. His faith sustains him as much because of what it prohibits as by what it promises.

The story of the rise of politicized sectarianism, 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 sectarianism” story reads that 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, sectarian 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. It claims that although religion is weakening on the national level, it is more important than ever on the local level. This is particularly true in the United States, whose inhabitants have long centered their religious life on local congregations, not on a single institutional church. It tells a tale of religious reorganization—a tale that is as plausible on the American scene as the tale of religious decline is on the European one.

Steve Warner points out that Europe was traditionally a region of villages, each dominated by a single church, the focal point both of religious life and of religious rebellion. The United States, in contrast, has long had a plurality of churches, none of which could dominate even local, much less national affairs. Moreover, these churches were usually 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 (Warner 1993, 1997).

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. Churches in my city even offer booklets highlighting their best features. 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 megachurches 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 (e.g.: Ammerman 1987, Davie 1995, Tweed 1997, Warner 1988). 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. (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Warner and Wittner 1998). Vietnamese immigrants in Houston, Texas, for example, have erected a large Buddhist temple, which serves as both a religious and a community center for new arrivals. San Antonio, Texas, where I now live, contains similar cultural and spiritual homes for new immigrants from Lebanon, Egypt, Russia, Mexico, India, China, and so on. There are also ethnic congregations for the older immigrant groups from Greece, Poland, and Bohemia (Czech), for example.

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? The secularization narrative looks at macro-social trends to predict religion's future; what might the reorganization narrative see? So far, no group of scholars has worked this out in detail, but here is one possible account of what is going on.

Among the social changes of the last century has been the growth of large-scale social and economic institutions, which have greater and greater influence in individuals' lives. Various terms have been used: “mass society”, “societalization”, and “the new globalized world”, this social order greatly expands the reach of governments, big industries, and commercial enterprises and restricts individuals' sense of control over their own fates. One result is a retreat to family and friends as a source of support and identity: a return to localism as a haven in a time of troubles. The religious congregation stands

alongside the family in offering personal support and close social ties—as a locus of *religious emotion*, to use Daniele Hervieu-Léger's concept (Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990). The growth of a mass society makes such personal connections all the more important; religion—in its local manifestation—becomes increasingly socially important.

This sociological explanation of religious reorganization—speculative though it is—supports some of the versions of the secularization narrative, while opposing others. It can easily accommodate the issues of institutional differentiation and privatization, as these social processes underlie mass social development. It does not, however, conclude that increasing societalization leads to religion's decline; on the contrary, the local becomes more important, not less, as large-scale institutions grow. And this explanation does not suppose that the growth of mass society undercuts religious belief, in part because it does not view belief as central to congregational life. This narrative says that religious *belonging* is much more important to understanding current trends.

Religious Individualization

A fourth narrative also speaks of religious restructuring, but not from one organizational level to another. This story tells of a fundamental shift in the locus of religion from organizations to individuals. I call this the story of religious individualization. It tells us that individuals now pick and choose among various religious options, crafting a custom-made religious life, rather than choosing a package formulated by any religious hierarchy.

In the past, the story tells us, religions were centered on formal organizations: churches, synagogues, mosques, and so on. People's membership in one or another church pretty much predicted their beliefs and actions. One could expect a Catholic to believe in the Trinity, to attend Mass, to venerate the saints, and to eat fish on Fridays; one could expect a conservative Baptist to read the Bible daily, to pray in a specific manner, to believe in personal salvation, and to avoid dancing and drink. Generally speaking, there was a good match between a church's official pronouncements and a church member's individual religious patterns.

The religious present, says this narrative, is much different. Religious diversity has grown, not just between churches but within them. 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, Jody Davie (1995) found a vast array of beliefs, many of them specifically opposed by that denomination’s core creeds. Yet, individuals in the group found these beliefs very meaningful, even central to their individual religious views; and they supported each other’s religious individuality. Even their clergy supported their religious eclecticism, asking that they relate their individual religious meanings to Presbyterian tradition rather than merely accepting what that tradition offers. Meredith McGuire’s (1988) study of non-medical healing found a similar religious eclecticism, as did my own (unpublished) study of a liberal Episcopalian congregation. Clark Roof documented this eclecticism among American Baby Boomers, arguing that a sizeable proportion of this birth cohort could be characterized as “religious seekers”, more interested in pursuing vibrant spiritual lives than in religiosity as defined by their particular denominations or their congregations. Similar studies have found the same pattern in other countries.

The situation among American Catholics is a bit different. Andrew Greeley attributed the mid-1970s decline of American Catholic church attendance and financial contributions to the rank-and-file’s objection to the Vatican’s hard line against birth control. Nonetheless, he says that Catholics are loyal to their religion; they just do not appreciate the hierarchy’s attempt to define it for them (Greeley and McManus 1987). More recent clergy scandals only accelerate this trend, pitting the hierarchy against the laity. 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 (Spickard 2003, McGuire and Spickard 2003).

The religious individualism narrative sees both these Protestant and Catholic developments as examples of the growing autonomy of religious believers. Individual religion no longer mirrors an institutionally defined package of beliefs and practices. Rather, individuals construct their faiths out of many disparate elements, not limited to one tradition. Nancy Ammerman (1997) suggests that this effort to craft a spiritually meaningful life may be part of the post-modern condition: a central aspect of the shape of individuality in our era. Religious individualism is a natural result.

This is not just an American phenomenon. Hamberg (1992) and Riis (1994) found similar patterns in Scandinavia, as did Hervieu-Léger (1986) in France. Indeed, Hervieu-Léger shows how individuals no longer feel the need to conform themselves to the established churches, but instead practice “religion *à la carte*”, in which institutionally validated beliefs are less and

less important in individual religious lives. In sum, there is as much evidence supporting this narrative as there is for the others I have discussed.

There are, however, some problems with this story, insofar as it is presented as a general picture of religious change. Most importantly, its picture of the Western past is inaccurate: it is not likely true that people once simply accepted the views of their church leaders as their own. Meredith McGuire (2000, forthcoming) notes that before the Reformations of the 16th and 17th centuries, European Christian individual belief and practice was markedly eclectic. Individuals had a vast array of daily religious practices to choose or reject, saints to venerate or to ignore, festivals to celebrate or avoid. Both elite and popular religion focused on ritual practice, rather than orthodox belief. So long as individuals adhered to such core practices as baptism and Holy Week duties, they had considerable choice about what else they did for their religious devotions. Pre-Reformation Christianity was much akin to the South Asian Hindu and Buddhist traditions in the scope it gave individuals to create their own meaningful lives.

In this light, we might reframe the “religious individualism” narrative a bit. Perhaps religious individualism is not, as observers like Thomas Luckmann (1967) claim, a natural outgrowth of late modernity. Perhaps, the balance has merely shifted back to religious eclecticism and cultic tolerance, from the religious centralism and narrow, controlled boundaries that the Reformations imposed.

In any event, the religious individualization narrative captures something of what is happening to religion in the modern world. Like the secularization, fundamentalist, and reorganization narratives, it describes a piece of what is happening and focuses on facts that other stories miss. None of these stories, however, fully answers our two core questions: “What is happening to religion today?” and “What will religion be like in the years to come?”

The Supply Side of Religious Markets

A fifth religious narrative claims to answer these questions fully, with a general theory of how religion works in all times and places. It 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 religious monopoly. 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. 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 historical application of this method is Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s *The Churching of America, 1776-1990* (1992). Creatively using church membership statistics, the authors trace the rise and fall of several American Protestant denominations over the last 200 years. Unlike Europe, with its state-supported monopoly churches, the United States has long had a relatively free market for religion. Those churches that can attract members prosper; those churches that cannot do so decline. Finke and Stark chart the growth and relative decline of Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and various sectarians—the market share of each rising as it exploits promising market niches, and falling as it liberalizes its theology and accommodates to the world. This version of the supply-side story is relatively simple: “successful” (i.e.: growing) churches are otherworldly and preach “the old-time religion”; churches decline as they move “up-market” by appealing to the liberal elite rather than to the conservative masses. Religious monopolies reduce religious participation, as clergy do not depend for their livelihood on “selling” their “product.” This explains Europe’s religious decline, because state churches have long dominated the European religious market.

What, then, does this narrative recommend to religious leaders who wish their churches to remain strong? According to Stark and Finke (2000; cf Spickard 2002b), the first step is to deregulate the religious marketplace and the second is to emphasize the supernatural. The end of religious monopolies, we are told, will increase the total number of church members and attenders, as a higher proportion of the population finds churches that cater to their specific needs. 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 free religious market increases the total supply of religious “goods”, increasing the trade in religion overall. Yet, most people, according to Finke and Stark, want an “old-time religion” that promises salvation and sure answers. Their analysis of church membership trends claims to show a cross-cultural preference for supernaturalistic religions that offer a vision of a “life beyond.” Historical data provide some support for this conclusion, as do the growth of contemporary evangelical, fundamentalist, and pentecostal denominations (including the various charismatic renewals) and the membership declines of American mainline Protestantism fit this pattern well.

I do not have space to say more here about this narrative, though it has generated many cogent critiques and vigorous ripostes. (See, *inter alia*, Carroll (1996), Young (1997) and Spickard (1998).) This simple story—for that

is its strength—is extremely popular among young sociologists, though it has generated more concepts than substance, quite possibly because most of its advocates have little cross-cultural experience. No account of religious narratives should pass it by.

Religion in the Context of Globalization

Had I written this essay a few years ago, I would have stopped here. The preceding five narratives are all well-established in sociological circles. The sixth religious narrative is not so well-established, not because its champions are obscure but because it has not, until recently, become a story about contemporary religious life. Until now, it has been a topic, an approach, a set of elements to consider, but not a finished story.

In a set of recent publications, however, Peter Beyer (1998, 2003a, 2003b, cf 1994) has created a story about religion in the context of globalization—one that runs something like this. Once upon a time, there were many different societies around the world, each with its own set of practices. Some of these practices helped people eat; others organized their social relations; still others dealt with matters that we would today call “religious”. Not that they were “religious”, in and of themselves, for, as Beyer (2003a:334) notes, “the modern sense of what counts as religion ... is a product of a relatively recent, highly selective, and somewhat arbitrary historical (re)construction”. Beyer reminds us that “religion” is a concept, a heading used to name various acts, ideas, and so on. Such concepts are not fixed but have different meanings in different times and places. They are, in short, social constructions—and the process by which “religion” came to be constructed is the second step in Beyer’s story.

In his telling, as the West expanded its political and economic reach toward other parts of the globe—an activity that we will call, for short, “imperialism”—Western scholars followed. They saw things that looked like our post-Reformation Christianities and named them “religions”. Thus, for example, they constructed “Hinduism” as a unitary religious practice out of the panoply of Indian temple worship. They constructed “shamanism” as a cross-culturally coherent means by which tribal peoples interacted with the spirit world. They attempted to construct a similar Chinese “religion”, though the Chinese, in their inimitable way, threw this back at them, saying that they did not have any *zongjiao* (literally, “belief-cults”), which was their reading of what the Christian missionaries had brought them. Ironically, this Chinese act solidified a cross-cultural definition of “religion”—one modeled on the religions of the West. It was the exception that proved the rule.

Furthermore, these Western scholars posited a universal “religious sphere”, to which all societies must somehow respond. They regarded this

sphere as foundational—because Christianity claimed to be the ground of life—and also to be transcendent, because Christianity claimed to transcend life. Based on their own history of religious wars, they encoded religious freedom in their constitutions. As the world left the colonial age, this freedom was added to various international documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and so on. Thus “religions” came to be seen as more than a Western product, but something basic to human life, not to be denied. In short, though there was once no universal image of “religion”, there is one now—a result of Western political and ideological imperialism, but one that has outlasted its origin. Almost everyone now thinks that religion is a natural part of human existence.

The third step in Beyer’s story stems from imperialism’s backwash: the global migrations that typify our post-colonial age. As Salman Rushdie once remarked, today “you can live upstairs from Khomeini” (quoted by Beyer 1994:1). A walk down Brixton Road in London brings you face to face with religions from around the world: Pakistani Muslims next to Hare Krishnas, Nigerian pentecostals next to Orthodox Jews (Smith 2000).⁴ The point is not just that one could change religions twenty times within two kilometers, if one were so inclined. The point is that globalization has brought people together who never would have met each other before. And new media make living together no longer a matter of having to meeting physically. We all share space with the Khomeinis of the world in a way once thought impossible.

This has consequences, especially since all these people now think that they have religions, all think that they have rights to these religions, and all think that these religions are somehow central to their identities. This goes also for people who have no religion: they have a right to no-religion, having no-religion is central to their identity, and so on.

Beyer says that this whole intellectual complex makes religion tremendously important in the modern world. It also makes it something of a loose cannon. Depending on local circumstances and depending on local conflicts, people can use religious claims for social inclusion or social exclusion. They can use them to motivate peace or to motivate war. Unlike the secularization and rise-of-fundamentalism stories, Beyer’s globalization narrative tells us that we can’t predict what will happen to religion in any particular case. We can predict, however, that religion will remain important, precisely because our definition of “the religious sphere” has made it an ideological resource open to all manner of uses.

⁴ One can visit Smith’s web tour at: <http://www.astoncharities.org.uk/research/religion/index.shtml>.

Were we to ask Beyer “What is happening to religion?” I think he would say, “It is becoming very messy.” And I would have to agree.

Beyond Narratives

This brings me to the end of my essay. We have six stories about “What is happening to religion today?” and about “What will happen to it in the future?” Much current work in the sociology of religion revolves around one or another of these stories. Such work supports, critiques, or tests them for their applicability to the contemporary scene. Each of these stories is plausible, based on accumulated evidence; each highlights different aspects of religious life. Few sociologists are wedded to any single story, though most prefer one or two over the others. Yet, there are enough conflicts between them that simply splitting the difference between them does not create a coherent picture of religion’s present and future.

What, then, is one to do with such conflicting interpretive perspectives? Are they a sign of sociology’s unscientific status—of the “pre-paradigmatic state” that Thomas Kuhn traced in the history of the natural sciences many years ago? I do not think that this question has an easy answer. Rather than speaking of paradigms, I think it more useful to remember that we are dealing with narratives. Like all stories, these narratives do not just organize the data that we can see. More importantly, they orient us toward the future, toward the data that we cannot yet see.

Scholars of religion will wish to ask, among other things, “What are the consequences of the orientations that each of these stories recommends?”

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