Six Narratives in Search of a Future: Current ‘Theory’ in the Sociology of Religion

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These Common Sessions are dedicated to exploring “The Futures We Want,” which I presume includes highlighting the roles that our various sociological subdisciplines can play in what the subtitle of the sessions calls “global sociology and the struggles for a better world.”

This puts the sociology of religion in a bit of a predicament: sociologists once expected religion to disappear. They expected religion to retreat from public life as societies industrialize, rationalize, and globalize. Some thought religion would retain its role in optional private meaning-systems, yet all agreed that religion had lost its former cultural hegemony. Institutional differentiation, rationalization, societalization, and pluralism were supposed to sap religion’s organizational and conceptual strength. The result was a secular society and a privatized religion, meaningful to many but without the influence it had in former eras.

Not so fast, you say. What about North America’s politicized fundamentalism? What about Latin American and African prosperity-Pentecostals? What about radical Islam? To scan the newspapers, religion does not seem to be fading away, at least beyond the failing European state churches and the American mainline.

The fact is, the claim that religion is disappearing was a narrative, not a description of the real world. The sociology of religion missed the discursive turn, which noted that humans chiefly comprehend the world through talk. Talk simultaneously describes and constructs the world, the latter by identifying which parts of the world are relevant and which parts are not for any particular undertaking. This is as true for sociology as it is for anything else: how we talk about things shapes how we treat them.

The story about disappearing religion is but one of six stories about religion’s future that underpin the last century of sociological writing. In those stories, religion is either vanishing or growing stronger, individualizing or creating local communities, shaped by markets, or going global. Each of these six narratives presents a different view of religion and calls on different data to interpret religions’ current social significance.
For example, the story of vanishing religion cites the demographic collapse of European state churches and of the American Protestant Mainline and their concomitant loss of public influence. The story of religious resurgence, by contrast, focuses on the growth of self-proclaimed “conservative” religion, whose vibrancy it interprets as a distorted response to social disadvantage. The story of religious individualization points to the growth of such things as “cafeteria Catholicism,” spiritual self-help groups, 12-step programs, and a New Age “spiritual-not-religious” discourse that now infects even self-proclaimed “conservatives.” The story of local religion emphasizes religious congregations, portraying them as among the few functioning face-to-face communities in an increasingly impersonal world. The market story applies neoliberal economic ideas to the religious sphere, to claim that religious decline is a mirage resulting from state favoritism and regulation. Finally, a growing number of sociologists emphasize religions’ increased transnationalism. From studies of immigrant religion to the intercontinental trade in religious paraphernalia, to the worldwide recruitment of religious warriors, it is no longer possible to understand religion within national boundaries. This, too, becomes a master narrative to explain the shape of our era.

Each of these six stories has advocates. Each has generated a good deal of research. The problem is that research alone does not provide a secure picture of what is going on. One can, for example, read the membership declines of American liberal Protestant denominations as the result of growing religious disenchantment or as the result of growing religious conservatism. One can see these declines as a sign of increased individualism or an organizational shift from the national to the local level. Or one can see them as the result of the established churches’ failure to deliver a religious product that appeals to consumers. The various narratives too often resist data that does not fit their mold.

That is how narratives work. The sociology of religion is not pre-paradigmatic, in the Kuhnian sense; instead, we suffer from a surplus of (supposed) paradigms. Understanding why tells us a lot about sociology in general, about the sociology of religion in particular, and about how the study of religion can contribute to sociology’s future.

I shall make three points in what follows.

First, I shall argue that narratives are nothing new in sociology, particularly narratives about religion. Our discipline’s intellectual beginnings in nineteenth-century France led us to conceive of religion in a rather peculiar way. This shapes especially secularization theory and the story of religious resurgence, but it shapes some of the other narratives as well.

Second, I shall summarize each of the six narratives, pointing out a few of their strengths and weaknesses. Each of them does see real aspects of religion, and thus generates useful research. As theory, however, each comes up short. I shall hint how.
Third, I want to suggest a consequence of having a subdiscipline that mistakes narratives for testable theories. This is not just a consequence for sociology, but for society at large.

I

The fact is, certain ideas about religion were baked into sociology at birth. Despite German, American, British, and Italian contributions, early sociology arose in France. As Manuel Vásquez (2013) has written, like all pioneers, French sociologists had to distinguish their new discipline from other late-nineteenth-century intellectual movements. In constructing their science, they posed religion as a conceptual “Other.” Where sociology was scientific, religion was superstitious. Where sociology was built on intellectual merit, religion embodied authoritarian repression. Above all, sociology looked toward the future and religion was stuck in the past. This was not just Comte, with his famous three stages (theological, metaphysical, scientific). It also responded to the political fight between Republican France and the ultramontane Roman Catholic Church, whose proclamation of papal infallibility became a compressed symbol for religious authoritarian reaction. The Church did try to undermine the Third Republic; defenders of that Republic—including sociologists—hoped that religion would vanish as science triumphed. Social progress demanded nothing less.

Such anti-religious bias has continued through much of sociology’s existence. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all saw important roles for religion in the past, less so in the present. The Parsonian synthesis treated religion as one of several specialized institutions, increasingly relegated to society’s margins. Even in America, continued religiosity is something to be explained. Secularism is the unmarked category in most sociological writing.

This way of thinking would support the religion-is-vanishing narrative, even if we lacked data about religious decline. That’s what Vásquez meant when he called secularization theory sociology’s default view.

The resurgent religion narrative stems from a parallel source. First, there is Marx’s famous “opium of the people” remark, whose intention was not to denigrate religion but to point out its role in adjusting people to soulless conditions. In this view, religion resurges in response to social dislocation, status anxiety, and as a means of reorienting the self in a rapidly changing world. We talk about revitalization movements: those religious revivals that claim to restore the past while making the present more palatable to people in crisis. We talk about relative deprivation, which drives those who think they are losing status to embrace radical groups, religious ones among them. These views treat religion as false consciousness. They say, in effect, that participants think they are doing religion, but they are actually trying to salve secular injuries. To use Rodney
Stark’s term, religion is a “compensator” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 36). It is not the real show.

The slip, here, is from examining the social correlates of religious life to treating religion as something that needs to be explained. We find this attitude in five of the six stories we are considering. Besides the vanishing and resurgent stories, attention to religious individualism treats religion as primarily a source of meaning in a society where overarching meaning systems can no longer be assumed. Attention to religious communities similarly contrasts those communities with the (supposed) erosion of face-to-face ties in other parts of life. Market models of religion emphasize the “purchase” of “religious goods,” the consequences of “religious investment,” and, in early versions of the approach, the supernatural compensations that religion brings. Each of these narratives treats religion as an example or a symptom of other social processes. None of them treats it as a fact in itself.

Only the global-religion narrative sticks mainly to description (though some other narratives produce description as well). This is not just a matter of the global narrative’s newness, nor the fact that it does not yet constitute an overarching theory of the direction in which religion is moving. It may be that sociology has shunted religion aside for so long that we lack a ready way to explain religion’s new transnationalism as anything but a sideshow. Global economic forces happen on the main stage; global religion becomes a me-too. We sociologists simply do not know how to put religion in the center of the picture.

Going forward, this is the sociology of religion’s main task. We need to find new ways to think about religion that do not reduce religion to an afterthought or an epiphenomenon. In many ways, nineteenth-century religion was early sociology’s “Great Satan.” Each of the current narratives inherits this attitude. Each sees part of the religious picture, but only through a narrative lens.

II

What are those six narratives? We have met two, both of which connect religion to the social processes underlying modernity. The secularization story connects the decline of religion to modernity’s increased division of labor, to its emphasis on the national rather than on the local community, to its emphasis on the individual, and to its pluralism. The resurging religion story reads religion’s increased “conservatism” as a reaction to modernity’s destruction of traditional life and to the relatively rule-less nature of the contemporary world. Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs McWorld* (2001) contains both, drawing the connection between them. Some recent work usefully pushes these narratives’ boundaries. Examples include two collections that compare secularization regimes around the globe (Burchardt et al., 2015; Calhoun et al., 2011). Other examples are
works by Juergensmeyer (2003) and Roy (2004), each of whom differently explores the ways that radical resurgent religion creates a complex sense of identity.

The story of religious individualism runs as follows. In the past, religions were centered on organizations: churches, synagogues, mosques, and so on. People were socialized into following their organization’s institutional package. One could expect a Catholic to believe in the Trinity, attend Mass, and to venerate the saints, and one could expect a conservative Baptist to read the Bible, to proof-text, and to believe in personal salvation. The same held for other groups. The religious present, says this narrative, is much different. Today, people demand the right to choose their religious views for themselves, whether or not they follow the official line. For example, Meredith McGuire argues that the era of organizational hegemony was an anomaly, based on the Reformation effort to control believers’ lives; that era has now passed, as she shows in her studies of spiritual healing groups (1988) and individual “lived religion” (2008). Other studies by Davie (1995) on Presbyterian women and Brown (2001) on immigrant Haitian voodoo show similar religious patterns.

The story of religious localism was designed to explain American religious trends—specifically the decline of national denominations and the rise of local congregations as the core unit of religious life. American churches have long been organized locally, but never so much as today. At present, finding “the right” religious 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.

Why might religious localism be so important? The growth-of-congregations story sees it as 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-localism story tells us that religious declines on the national level do not add up to a decline of religion overall. In fact, it tells us to expect an expansion of religious localism in all of its forms.

A fifth religious narrative begins with the idea that churches compete for “customers” in religious “markets” (Stark and Finke, 2000; Finke and Stark, 2005). Those markets may consist of hundreds of competing small “firms” or they may consist of one or a few large churches that hold 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.

Despite its previously claimed status as a “new paradigm,” the religious-markets narrative is not so common of late. Not only did it depend on some rather questionable assumptions; its stronger claims also failed empirical testing (see Spickard, 1998; Olson, 1999; Chaves and Gorski, 2001).

Our final narrative is less coherent than the others, but that is perhaps because it moves in so many simultaneous directions. The story that religion is going global includes studies of religious immigration, of multi-polar religious communities; of “transnational villagers,” of dual- and multi-national religious organizations, and of “reverse missionizing” (Warner and Wittner, 1998; Smith and Kulothungan, 2006; Levitt, 2001; Spickard, 2004; Catto, 2012; Adogame, 2013). It includes Beyer’s 2006 Luhmanian analysis of religion as a global conceptual category. And it includes some of the work on transnational religious “conservatism” cited with the resurgent-religion narrative, above. The common thread is a new social ecosystem: national borders matter less than before, as cheap communications and air travel create new opportunities for non-local interaction. As the Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie put it, with globalization “things do not belong together and do live side by side . . . you can live upstairs from Khomeini” (i.e., from the very man who issued a fatwa calling for his murder; quoted in Beyer, 1994a: 1). Sociologists of religion are still figuring out how this changes things, if it in fact does.

These six narratives do not cover the entire subdiscipline, but they cover most of it. They are the too-often unexamined underpinnings of our investigations.

III

These underpinnings have consequences, and not just for sociology. They also influence public policy in detrimental ways. The religion-is-vanishing narrative, for example, leads to patronizingly liberal policies toward religion so long as it remains part of private life. Religion is seen as good, but we worry about people being “too religious,” particularly when they are religious in the public sphere. The French headscarf controversy and Americans’ fright over resurgent “fundamentalisms” are two examples. Each involves religion that refuses to stay private.

The resurgent-religion narrative goes a step further: it creates an opposition between religion and modern life. It is but a few steps from The Fundamentalism Project and Jihad vs McWorld to the calls of various American presidential
candidates to “fight back” against (supposedly) “medieval” religion (Marty and Appleby, 1991, 1992; Barber, 2001). In fact, this narrative has fed an anti-religious reaction. Hout and Fischer (2002), and more recently Putnam and Campbell (2010), have argued that the growth of irreligion among young Americans amounts to a statement that “If that’s religion, I don’t want any part of it.”

These two narratives undercut religions’ moral critique of the status quo. So do most of the others. Why pay attention to religious critique, if religions are vanishing from the world stage? Or individualizing? Or turning inward to form small communities? Why pay attention, if religions are just self-interested organizations with their own goods to sell? Especially why pay attention, when religions of all kinds seem to be increasingly and violently anti-modern?

None of our six narratives engages social teachings as a core part of religious life. None of them emphasizes the ability of religions to shape social life in intentional ways. Instead, religions are seen as irrelevant, as obstructionist, as inward, or as self-interested. There is no place for Selma, for Cape Town, or for Gdansk—i.e., for religiously driven social liberation—in these stories.

Why does this matter to sociology? Former ISA President Michael Burawoy (2015) has argued that we are in the midst of an intellectual movement that he calls “third-wave marketization.” This is the ideology that free markets cure all ills. The first wave began with the British critique of mercantilism, articulated by Adam Smith in the 1770s. The second wave began after World War I. The third wave took political power with the Thatcher and Reagan regimes in the 1980s. Each wave increased social inequality. Each destroyed workers’ rights. Each led to one or another form of economic collapse. The third wave is with us still.

Burawoy describes some of the forces that opposed (and still oppose) this marketization: workers’ movements, unions, political activists, intelligentsias. He does not mention the religious voices that opposed the first two waves, from the Christian Chartists through the Catholic social encyclicals to Protestant neo-orthodoxy, the civil rights movement, and liberation theology. This is symptomatic of sociology’s treatment of religion as a sideshow.

More importantly, where are the religious moral voices protesting the third wave? European churches are either silent or unheard. America’s Protestant Mainline has lost its public presence, Latin American and African Christianity concern themselves with personal, not social, betterment, Jihadist Islam attacks engaged Muslim intellectuals, Hindutva activists attack post-colonial theorists, and on and on. The 1986 American Catholic Bishop’s pastoral letter on the economy was heard, but Pope Benedict’s near identical Caritas in Veritate

* Besides Republican candidate Donald Trump’s pledge to bar Muslims from the U.S., candidate Carly Fiorina claimed that her undergraduate degree in medieval history would help her defeat the Islamist terrorist group ISIS.
(2009) was not. Only Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama seem present sources of religious morality to the public mind.

I am not just arguing that the social trends on which these six narratives focus undercut religious moral critique of the contemporary world—though I think they may. More than that, the six sociological narratives themselves reinforce this loss of voice, because they hide that aspect of religious life. To the degree that ordinary people look to sociology for insight, our accounts of religion hinder religions’ moral authority.

We sociologists of religion need to pay attention to what our discipline’s stories do not let us—and the public—see.

REFERENCES


