Is Sociology the Core Discipline for the Scientific Study of Religion?*

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Abstract

We argue that sociology should be the integrative discipline for the scientific study of religion. Sociology has made considerable progress by incorporating specialized knowledge of religion from disciplines ranging from gerontology and community psychology to religious economics, church history, and even theology. Sociology has also generated insights in other disciplines concerned with the study of religion, at times shaping the types of questions asked, the concepts and research methods employed, and the conclusions reached in these fields. To elaborate our arguments, we focus on two important substantive areas: (1) research on the relationships between religion, meaning systems, and personal well-being; and (2) research on religious behavior and religious markets. We underscore the integrative role of sociology, and identify several neglected opportunities for synthesis. In addition, briefly assess the effect of sociology on work in other disciplines and on the functioning of religious organizations.

We can expect controversy among sociologists over the proposition that sociology is a science, and certainly there will be even less agreement with the contention that sociology is the central discipline for the scientific study of human behavior. Critics of this thesis will turn to features of social life which seem idiosyncratic or inexplicable through the rational scientific enterprise, and religious behavior is one such feature. Less thoughtful critics poke fun at the title of a leading specialty journal, the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, as an oxymoron, suggesting that whatever the status of the discipline of sociology as a science, the sociology of religion would not qualify.

In this article, we will argue that sociology should be considered the integrative discipline for the scientific study of religion. Our task is somewhat different from those of the other contributors, because unlike the other fields represented here (e.g., biology, psychology), "religion" per se is neither an explanatory "science" nor a clearly delineated academic discipline. Sociology has

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achieved considerable progress to date by incorporating specialized knowledge of religion from disciplines ranging from gerontology and community psychology to religious economics, church history, and even theology. While much work remains to synthesize these insights, we believe that the foundations for explaining religious behavior and the impact of religion on individual and social life are already quite strong. Further, sociology has also generated insights in other disciplines concerned with the study of religion, at times shaping the types of questions asked, the concepts and research methods employed, and the conclusions reached in these fields.

To develop these arguments, we focus on two important substantive areas: (1) research on the relationships between religion, meaning systems, and personal well-being; and (2) research on religious behavior and markets. Our review of each of these areas underscores the distinctively integrative role of sociology and identifies several neglected opportunities for synthesis. In addition, we briefly assess the effect of sociology on work in other disciplines, and the impact of sociology on the functioning of religious organizations.

Religion, Meaning and Personal Well-being

A growing literature reports that conventional religious involvement (e.g., religious attendance and devotion) is positively associated with life satisfaction, personal happiness, physical health, and longevity, and inversely associated with depression and other undesirable psychosocial states (see Levin 1994). Drawing on insights from epidemiology, psychiatry, gerontology, and other fields, sociological research indicates that religious involvement promotes mental and physical well-being in at least four distinct ways: (1) by shaping behavior patterns and lifestyles in ways that reduce exposure to certain social stressors (e.g., illness and serious accidents, marital disruption); (2) by generating social resources and social support; (3) by enhancing psychological resources, particularly positive self-regard (i.e., self-esteem); and (4) by providing specific cognitive frameworks for coping with stress (see Ellison 1994). However, some aspects of religious belief and participation can also undermine well-being by exacerbating social stressors and their effects, by eroding positive self-regard, and by encouraging inappropriate or self-defeating coping strategies.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL STRESSORS

As classical sociologists recognized, religious institutions and beliefs often constrain individual conduct in a variety of ways. For example, epidemiologists indicate that some religious groups promote positive health behaviors (e.g., diet) and discourage negative practices (e.g., alcohol and substance abuse). The criminological literature indicates that religious involvement reduces the commission of a range of deviant behaviors. Family researchers have shown that certain religious values are related to positive marital and intergenerational relationships. These and other findings suggest that religious communities frequently promote behavior patterns that lower the risk of various social stressors.
At least four distinct processes may foster behavioral conformity within religious communities. First, religious training often results in the internalization of strong norms regarding personal lifestyles and conduct. The prospect of violating these deeply held religious norms may induce feelings of guilt and even physical discomfort (Grasmick, Bursik & Cochran 1991). Second, religious collectivities may constitute reference groups for their members. Thus, individuals may alter their conduct to make it consistent with that of others whom they consider worthy of emulation, or with whom they identify closely. Third, while behavior consistent with the standards of the given religious community may elicit approval and reinforcement from coreligionists, conduct which violates these standards may bring the threat of embarrassment, making deviant members the subjects of gossip, ostracism, or even formal sanctions. Fourth, intensive involvement in religious pursuits and networks may reduce the opportunities for participation in deviant activities. Further work by sociologists can specify these religious mechanisms of social control.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL RESOURCES

In addition to serving as institutions of social control, religious groups often play an integrative role, providing social resources that mediate and/or moderate the negative health consequences of social stress (Ellison & George 1994). First, religious involvement tends to enhance the size and density of an individual’s social networks. Individuals frequently cultivate friendships with like-minded others within religious congregations, and persons embedded in religious communities often enjoy social networks that are larger and denser than those of unaffiliated individuals. Second, social workers, community psychologists, and others report that persons who participate regularly in religious congregations receive more social support than nonparticipants. Such helping behavior (e.g., companionship, sharing goods and services) is often provided informally by other congregational members. Furthermore, many religious groups have formal programs that assist persons with special needs. Third, compared with unchurched persons, regular participants in religious congregations feel more confident that their friends and associates value and care for them and can be counted on in times of need. Religious rituals and congregational events (e.g., homecomings, revivals) may foster a sense of community by reminding members of their collective past and renewing their sense of common purpose. In addition, because religious communities are often governed by norms and rhetoric of altruism and reciprocity, support providers in a religious setting may be confident that “credits” accrued via their prosocial behavior will be honored in the future.

While sociological studies in this vein already have drawn on insights and evidence from a number of different disciplines, several additional opportunities for integration and synthesis await future researchers. For example, in attempting to identify the structural, programmatic, and ideological features of congregations that foster social support and feelings of community, sociologists might focus on two disparate disciplines: (1) community psychologists, who conceptualize and measure “congregational climates,” or collective perceptions of the interpersonal, organizational, and spiritual environment within groups
(e.g., Pargament et al. 1983); and (2) congregational planners, who explore variations in small-group intimacy (e.g., relational groups, mix-and-share groups, cells) as key determinants of church growth and decline (e.g., Callahan 1983).

RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Although some researchers have claimed that religious beliefs and practices undermine positive self-regard, recent studies suggest that religious involvement promotes certain aspects of self perception and self-esteem (i.e., the sense of moral self-worth) and that this sense of self is a psychological resource that mediates and/or moderates the relationships between stress and health. Sociologists addressing this issue draw on classic works on the self-concept and the psychology of religion. First, they note that routine interactions with like-minded others within religious communities frequently reinforce basic role identities, commitments, and expectations. Moreover, many religious congregations provide a context in which members benefit from positive "reflected appraisals" because they are positively evaluated — on the basis of individual characteristics, such as their sociability and service, and/or their "spiritual capital" (i.e., perceptions of their morality and wisdom), rather than on their socioeconomic status or physical appearance (Ellison 1993).

Second, sociologists have drawn on the psychological role theories of religious experience proposed by Sunden and others, suggesting that individuals construct relationships with a divine "other" much as they build ties with social others (Pollner 1989). In brief, a divine personification may be experienced through identification with various figures portrayed in sacred texts and other religious media. By identifying with these figures, individuals may (1) come to define their own life circumstances in terms of a biblical figure's plight, and then (2) begin to interpret their situations from the point of view of the "God-role" (i.e., what God would want and/or expect of them) (Wikstrom 1987). The role-taking perspective has several implications for positive self-regard. For instance, role-taking may lead an individual to view him/herself as participating in a unique and ongoing personal relationship with the creator of the universe. To the extent that the individual perceives that God loves and forgives him/her, that person may well derive a heightened sense of self-worth. In addition, religious role-taking may foster feelings of (vicarious) efficacy, leading to the perception that an omnipotent divine "other" is purposively participating in one's personal affairs (Ellison 1993).

Proponents of the religious role-taking perspective assign a prominent place to prior religious socialization, which creates the "expectations" that both foster and frame religious experience (Wikstrom 1987). In this view, private devotional involvement and experience are institutionally and socially structured, rather than purely intrapsychic or idiosyncratic. Such an approach raises important issues for sociologists. Religious denominations and theological traditions surely differ in (1) the extent to which they emphasize the establishment of divine relations and (2) the types of divine imagery that they convey. Divine relations and imagery may also vary across other aspects of social location — occupation-
al complexity and education, race/ethnicity, life-cycle position, gender — in ways which remain poorly understood.

This role-taking perspective also underscores the significance of scriptures and other texts as sources of religious role models and role repertoires. It is clear that while individuals seek solace and guidance from scripture, the same text often carries sharply divergent meanings for different "interpretive communities," or groups that share and socialize strategies or ground rules for the legitimate interpretation of a given text (Fish 1980). Unfortunately, the diversity, scope, and limits of such interpretive communities — and their influence on individual religious experience and well-being — have not been widely investigated. The synthesis of insights from literary criticism, religious studies, and theology is vital if sociologists are to understand how individuals and communities draw upon selected themes and passages from religious texts in constructing divine relations.

RELIGION AND COPING

In recent years, drawing upon ideas from psychology, theology, and other disciplines, sociologists have shown a growing interest in religious coping strategies (Ellison 1993, 1994). First, religious values can diminish the degree to which a given event or condition is perceived to be a threat — e.g., it can be redefined as a challenge or an opportunity. In certain circumstances, religious redefinitions may also suggest problem-solving strategies that were not initially apparent. Second, religious cognitions may help individuals to manage the emotional consequences of stressors that are less malleable — e.g., by reassuring them that God cares about their suffering, or that the event or condition is meaningful, part of a broader divine plan. Certain events or conditions — e.g., serious accidents, bereavement, major illnesses — may be especially amenable to religious coping because (1) they are "boundary experiences," challenging even the existence of human life as we know it, (2) they undermine our commonsense beliefs that the world is just and predictable, and (3) unlike other events, they do not always lend themselves to satisfying nonreligious accounts (Foley 1988). Third, religious practices may regulate stress-related emotions by simply diverting one's attention from the problematic condition.

Further integrative work by sociologists is needed to clarify the ways in which religious "role models" of suffering and hope are brought into the coping process. To be sure, some individuals likely appropriate these role models from scripture directly. However, drawing on contemporary cultural and literary theory, Wuthnow (1993) has recently suggested that scriptural themes and images are likely to be mediated by more proximate examples of suffering or hope — in the lives of close friends, associates, public figures, media characters, or religious testimonials — for these involve contemporary experiences to which persons can relate. In addition, sociologists might also consider the links between specific rituals and doctrines — e.g., beliefs regarding the intercession of saints — and successful coping with specific types of stressors, such as bereavement. Moreover, given the (apparently) widespread interest in nontraditional or emergent modes of religious expression (e.g., New Age healing,
paganism, astrology), it will be important to explore the potential role of these beliefs and practices in dealing with hard times.

Finally, possible negative implications of religious coping also merit investigation. Individuals who dwell on themes of sin, judgment, and divine omnipotence when confronting problems may experience feelings of guilt and powerlessness, rather than comfort and confidence. Further, the members of some religious groups or traditions may experience certain undesirable events and conditions as especially devastating because of (1) incongruity between their objective situations and internalized religious norms, and/or (2) feelings of estrangement from coreligionists.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIOLOGY

To this point, we have focused on how sociologists interested in religion and personal well-being have integrated insights from other disciplines. However, it is also important to point out that sociological perspectives have made their mark in other disciplines. For instance, sociological studies have led gerontologists, epidemiologists, and others toward the more careful multidimensional conceptualization and measurement of religious involvement. Moreover, researchers from these other disciplines borrow from "middle-range" sociological theories to suggest that patterns of religious involvement and their implications for individuals vary across theological traditions, life-cycle positions, racial/ethnic and gender categories, regions, and social classes, as a consequence of (1) variations and shifts in social roles and (2) the distinctive histories of religious institutions and cultures. Further, the work of Bellah and colleagues (1985), among many others, has renewed cross-disciplinary interest in the meaning and impact of contemporary religious community, fellowship, and identity.

Individual Choices, Social Constraints, and Institutional Dynamics

Above we outlined how sociology informs the study of the consequences of religion for individuals and what religious institutions and meaning systems do for individuals. In this section we will focus on the interplay between individuals and institutions, and the organizational dynamics of religious institutions. Throughout this discussion we will draw explicitly on theoretical ideas from economics and cognitive psychology and implicitly on studies of religious history. We begin at the individual level and sketch a sociological perspective for understanding how individual religious meaning is informed by religious institutions and how it affects individual decisions about religious affiliation and participation. Second, following recent studies of religious markets, we examine institutional environments that structure religious choices and inform religious meaning. Third, we discuss the organizational dynamics that affect institutional offerings, thereby influencing both individual decisions to participate and the vitality of religious organizations. Finally, we examine how sociology is received among religious leaders and scholars from various disciplines concerned with religious studies. We conclude that systematic examinations of individual religious meaning systems and the operation of religious organizations are
informed by insights from a variety of disciplines (especially economics, psychology, and church history) and that these insights are most often and most readily integrated through sociological analysis.

SCHEMAS, PREFERENCES, AND RELIGIOUS CHOICES

Individual religious meaning systems are not simply a reflection of the beliefs and values of religious groups. We detail how actors’ orientations are both informed by religious institutions and how they also influence these organizations. Our discussion of the interplay between individuals and institutions draws on Sewell’s (1992) view of structure as simultaneously composed of: (1) actors’ schemas and (2) socially constituted resources. In our view, the dual nature of religious structures is evidenced by the reciprocal influence between individuals and religious organizations and other social attachments of religious import. Religious schemas direct religious role taking, promote well-being, influence actions, and ultimately inform choices regarding religious behavior. Integration into religious communities fostered by the collective nature of religious participation and bolstered by the social construction of religious meaning within interpretive communities complicates the relationship between schemas and religious choices in two ways. First, religious communities influence choices by directing preferences and schemas. Second, religious communities direct our religious behaviors by rewarding or punishing behaviors in spite of our preferences. Moreover, religious choices are influenced by changes in religious organizations, and choices about organizational commitments are negotiated over time (Snow et al., 1986).

When examining the intersection between individuals’ schemas and religious institutions, schemas should be viewed as preferences for religious ideologies, styles of participation, and organizational forms (cf. Elster 1983; Sherkat 1995; Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Religious communities help instill preferences, and these preferences are influenced by social conditions and life events. Preferences are generally adaptive, with people typically preferring the familiar. However, new preferences may develop when novel information is introduced, or when seductive opportunities arise — when someone is enticed to try religious goods they subsequently come to prefer. Since religious goods are imbued with a great deal of uncertainty (e.g., one does not know if salvation is attained), new meaning systems are more likely to be accepted if they come from trusted friends or family members. However, some individuals reject familiar religious goods and prefer novelty; this is called “counteradaptive preference.”

Shifts in preferences should not be confused with social influences on choices (cf. Ellison 1995; Ellison & Sherkat 1995; Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Indeed, religious choices do not simply follow egoistic desires, but take into account social relations. For example, choices may be taken: (1) to please significant others (e.g., going to church to please parents or friends); (2) to spite others (driven by antipathy, in contrast to sympathy); (3) to set an example, as when parents go to church to provide a model for children’s behaviors; and, (4) to garner rewards or to avoid penalties (e.g., access to mating markets, business contacts, loss of reputation). These social influences must be separated from
participation resulting from distinctively religious desires, and identifying these influences requires a sociological approach.

The above discussion points to a number of ways that sociology can integrate insights from economic theory and cognitive psychology. Although the concept of preference is borrowed from economics, social influences on preferences and choices have been explicitly ignored by economists, who typically treat preferences as stable and choices as being mechanically linked to preferences. Indeed, with a few exceptions, economists have failed to explore: (1) the degree to which choices are revealed in preferences; (2) where preferences come from; and (3) how preferences might change. Sociological insights allow us to go beyond the egoistic assumptions of neoclassical economics and view preferences as both dynamic and limited by social constraints. By embedding religious markets in their social context, we can: (1) explain dissonance between preferences and choices by examining social influences; (2) understand how preferences are definable in terms of individual meaning; (3) examine how religious value is constructed in religious communities; and, (4) account for changes in preferences. While sociology provides a framework for integrating issues in the study of religious behavior, to date few scholars have applied sociologically grounded economic reasoning, and fewer still have merged economic and psychological theories with insights derived from socialization and network theories.

Religious Markets: Organizations, Environments, and Options

While individuals' preferences inform religious choices, these choices are limited to options available on the religious market. Following Adam Smith's often overlooked discussion of the efficiency of religious sects and their superiority to monopoly state churches, recent sociological investigations of religious choices have borrowed heavily from classical economic theory. From this "supply side" perspective, rates of religious participation are linked to the quality and diversity of choices offered by religious firms, rather than to variations in preferences or normative influences (cf. Finke & Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991). In a free religious market a variety of high quality offerings will be provided, consequently rates of participation are expected to be high. In contrast, religious monopolies offer uniform goods, and tend to produce inferior products. From this perspective, state subsidies are required to keep monopoly organizations viable, and regulation is needed to prevent alternatives from entering the market. However, others have pointed to the success of local religious monopolies, which foster high rates of participation by imposing normative sanctions against nonparticipants (cf. Blau, Redding & Land 1993; Ellison & Sherkat 1995). In this view, the consolidation of social ties across cultural, social, and economic spheres makes it difficult for individuals to sever religious connections without paying a price in other contexts. Normative constraints on choice are most often operative when religious firms in an area are tied to a particular ethnic or quasi-ethnic group.

Rather than rejecting the supply-side perspective entirely, we contend that normative influences on religious choices imply that religious voluntarism
should be viewed as a variable feature of religious markets, rather than a constant. However, little research has tested the limits of voluntarism despite a number of suitable contexts (Mormons in Utah, Southern Baptists in the South, Muslims in Iran). Further, theologians, religious leaders, and some scholars staunchly defend the voluntarism thesis and the aura of democratic legitimacy it provides to religious institutions. Future research on religious markets should incorporate data at individual, congregational, and community levels to examine the interface between individual religious preferences and choices in the marketplace (Ellison & Sherkat 1995). Macrolevel inquiries into market constraints and market structure must be merged with microlevel investigations of the distribution of religious preferences and social constraints on individual religious choices.

Organizational Change and Market Dynamics

The secularization paradigm, which predicts a declining influence of religion as societies modernize, provides a starting point for discussions of how religious organizations change, and how changes influence market offerings and choices, although sophisticated sociological investigations no longer view secularization as a social fact (Warner 1993). Secularization theories from sociology have been very influential in interdisciplinary studies of religion and even in religious organizations. Theologians and religious leaders from “mainline” denominations accepted the secularization thesis and sought to make their organizations more secular and rational, since this presumably would allow them to thrive in the modern world. Religious organizations typically change from sects having high levels of tension with secular society to churches having lower levels of tension. Scholarly investigations have shown how this secularization process within denominations is self-limiting (cf. Stark & Bainbridge 1985). Sects change in response to pressures from economically successful later generations who have rejected their parents’ asceticism. This organizational response to the preferences of some members emphasizes how individuals’ religious schemas influence institutional orientations. Operational demands of growing organizations also lead to changes such as: (1) an educated clergy; (2) clear statements of dogma; and, (3) a more accommodating approach to membership demands. These organizational changes alter religious products, which may spawn movements attempting to reestablish original sectarian principles.

In their masterful work integrating religious history with sociological analysis and economic theory, Finke and Stark (1992) argue that two of the key motivating factors in the decline of the Methodists were: (1) relinquishing demands placed on members; and, (2) moving away from exclusivist teachings. Groups imposing sacrifices on members will have congregants with greater commitment because initial costs screen out persons with low levels of commitment. More committed members allow sects to produce higher levels of social rewards through more effective collective production (cf. Iannaccone 1994). Hence, organizational changes that remove demands on members will lower the benefits that members receive from participation. While frivolous demands will repel members, undemanding groups are also unrewarding.
Sectarian movements claim certainty about otherworldly matters, and impose this-worldly costs on members who go astray. However, church-like groups make no exclusive claims on the truth and tolerate low levels of commitment. Denominations lacking an exclusive theology: (1) find it difficult to sustain religious meaning that provides solace to members; and (2) undermine the downward social comparisons that give solace to the pious that the wicked will be punished. Given the centrality of religious meaning systems to the identities of many individuals, and the relationship between existential certainty and organizational success, it is no wonder that strong religious movements often give rise to political movements seeking state sponsorship of religious strictures. The conjunction between strong religious identities and powerful organizations sometimes produces violent political outbursts in a variety of cultural contexts, as in the abortion controversy in the U.S., militant Zionism in Israel, sectarian Islamic groups in various places, Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and Sikhs in the Punjab. Indeed, there is a great deal of interdisciplinary interest in absolutist religious groups, as is evidenced by the recent four-volume series on comparative fundamentalisms edited by church historian Martin Marty.

The Influence of Sociology

Denominational leaders, theologians, and religious scholars with strong ties to "mainline" denominations often resent the desacralizing objectivity of contemporary sociological analysis. Religious leaders tend to view their calling as a search for ultimate truths and greater goodness, rather than serving the preferences of the masses to satisfy customers. Thus, the maintenance of religious principles takes precedence over a decline in membership, and sociological indicators of success (e.g., participation rates and organizational influence on members) are viewed as irrelevant or even antithetical to their philosophy. In contrast, religious leaders from conservative traditions view contemporary sociological findings on membership growth, participation rates, and denominational influence as a demonstration of the superiority of their faiths. Less partisan experts in church growth identify sociological elements of successful religious traditions and have produced numerous manuals on increasing participation and membership (e.g., Callahan 1983). Further, private foundations concerned with religious issues (e.g., Lilly Endowment) have made church growth and decline a priority issue and have recognized the centrality of sociology for understanding these issues. By focusing on rates of increase, even research-oriented funding agencies and church growth-and-decline experts often fail to grasp the key sociological insights regarding the importance of community building for the maintenance of commitment and the production of religious benefit. However, such limitations have not undermined the legitimacy of sociology for understanding these issues.

Conclusion

We have argued that sociology should be viewed as the integrative discipline for the scientific study of religion, developing this claim via a brief review of recent work in two leading substantive areas: (1) religious variations in health
and psychological well-being; and (2) religious behavior and markets. Our
review indicates that sociology continues to make its mark on other disciplines.
For instance, sociological methods and theories have influenced work in various
health- and service-related fields, while recent sociological studies have
prompted a reassessment of conventional interpretations of American religious
history. In addition, denominational bureaucracies have used sociological ideas
in their quest to foster lay participation and to revitalize flagging institutions.

Such examples of influence notwithstanding, the most valuable contribution
of sociology is to synthesize insights and theories from other disciplines. For
instance, sociologists interested in religion and personal well-being draw
together the research of epidemiologists, social workers, community psycho-
logists, psychiatrists, and many others. In a similar way, sociologists interested
in religious behavior and organizational processes incorporate the work of
theoretical and empirical economists, church historians, religious scholars, and
others. In each instance, sociologists are integrating such specialized knowledge
into more comprehensive and sophisticated accounts of religious life than other
disciplines have produced.

To be sure, a number of promising avenues for additional integration
remain. In particular, sociologists of religion have frequently given short shrift
to theological ideas. Further, with few exceptions, sociological analyses have
failed to incorporate popular and pastoral materials ("insider documents") that
are produced, distributed, and consumed within specific religious communities.
Closer attention to such sources could clarify the divergent presuppositions that
frame situations, guide decisions, and orient actions within these religious
subcultures. Despite these and other neglected opportunities, however, we
believe that sociology is uniquely qualified to be the integrative discipline for
the scientific study of religion.

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