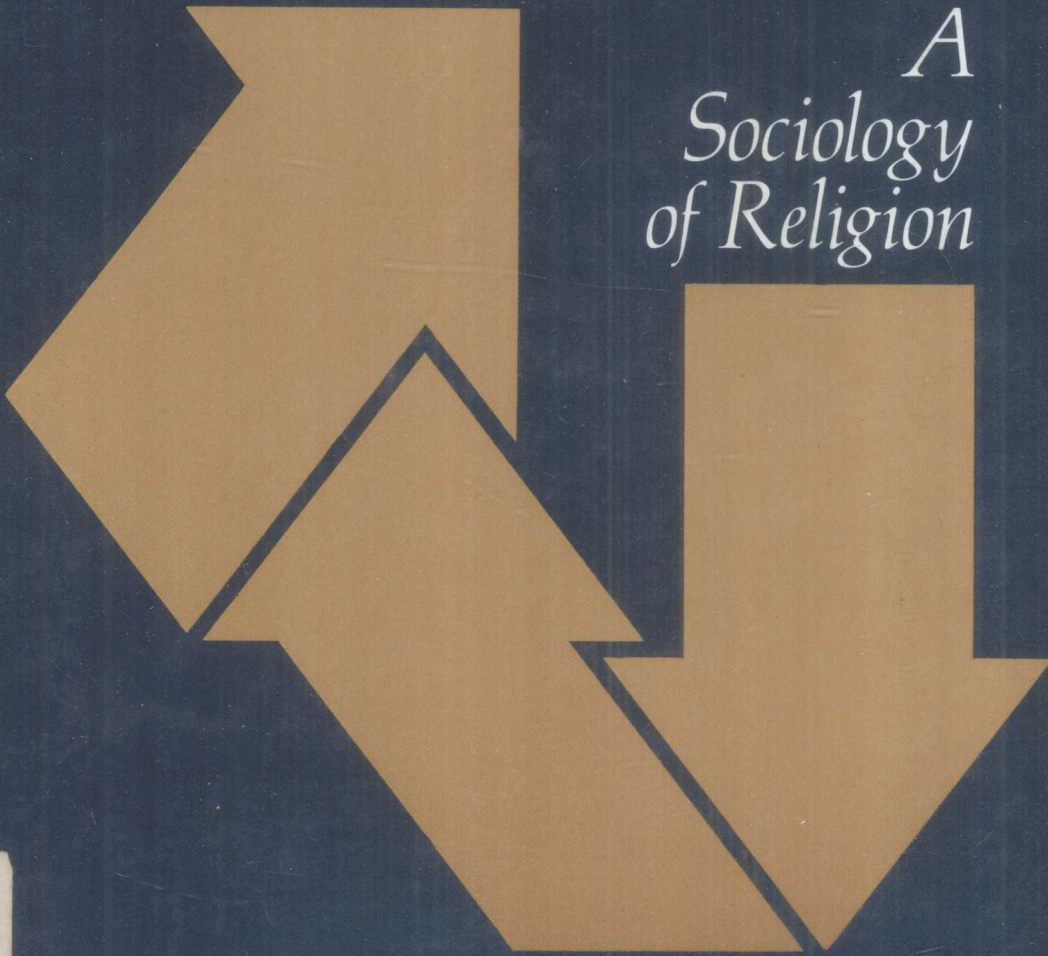


Second Edition

RELIGION
Ronald L. Johnstone IN
SOCIETY

A
*Sociology
of Religion*



Ronald L. Johnstone

CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

RELIGION IN SOCIETY
A Sociology of Religion
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Preface

This introductory text in second edition to the sociology of religion follows an outline that with continuing modifications has worked successfully in two decades of teaching courses variously titled *Religion and Society*, *Sociology of Religion*, and *Religion in Contemporary Society*. The book is intended primarily for a first college-level course in the sociology of religion, taken preferably by students who have had at least an introductory course in sociology.

Yet in writing the text, I also have kept in mind those persons who from time to time have asked me what the sociology of religion is all about. They seem to come primarily from the ranks of organized religion and include seminary professors and denominational administrators as well as clergy and laypeople in local congregations. This book will be an aid to them as they seek information and insight not only about an academic subject but also about the relationship of religion to the society in which they live.

The book consists of four parts. Part I is an introduction to the sociological perspective on religion. It grapples with the problem of defining religion, considers the fascinating but ultimately frustrating question of the origins of religion, and investigates the process by which a person becomes religious, that is, undergoes religious socialization. Part II focuses on the distinctive perspective that sociology has on religion as a social phenomenon. That is, how do general laws and principles of social and group life impinge on religion as it organizes itself into groups and carries on its activities? Also we

look closely at the classic church-sect continuum of religious organization and evolution. In Part III we look at the relationship of religion to major social institutions and structural features of society: religion and politics, religion and the economy, religion and social class, and finally religion and the role and perception of women in society. In Part IV we look specifically at some of the major features of religion in the United States—the social environment and experience of a majority of the readers of this text. After exploring several highly important socio-historical developments within American religion, particular attention is paid to American socio-religious developments, namely the black church and the phenomenon of denominationalism. The section concludes by focusing on primary sociological factors that will significantly affect the future of religion.

In this progression the reader will experience firsthand some of the problems inherent in the enterprise we call the sociology of religion and will become involved and somewhat expert in the process of applying the sociological perspective. The reader also will develop insight into the place of religion in society that will supplement one's prior understanding, whether gained from the inside as a believer or from the outside as a serious, or even casual, observer of the religious scene.

While the fundamental thrust and outline of this second edition follows that of the first, the reader will note at least three major changes: (1) the deletion of several chapters and sections of chapters, (2) informational updating throughout, and (3) the addition of substantial bodies of new material. The relationship of women to religion, the development of the New Religious Right, and the process of socialization into religious cults such as Jim Jones's Peoples Temple are major examples of such new material.

In any publication of one's work, debts to others are both many and significant. I wish to mention two sets of people in particular. First are four fellow sociologists who provided extremely helpful suggestions at crucial stages of writing and revision. They are Philip L. Berg (University of Wisconsin—La Crosse), Harold S. Himmelfarb (Ohio State University), Harold W. Melvin (Fitchburg State College), and Anson D. Shupe, Jr. (University of Texas at Arlington). Second, Annette Davis, Kirsten Johnstone, and Donna Johnstone provided typing services not only in good form but with good humor as well.

R.L.J.

Contents

Preface vii

I INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

1 The Sociological Perspective 3

Characteristics of the Sociology of Religion 4 Central
Sociological Assumptions 5 A Sociological Definition of
Religion 9 The Characteristics of Religion 9 A Formal
Definition of Religion 15 Application of the Definition 16
Final Reflection on the Definition of Religion 19 A Concluding
Historical Note: The Development of the Sociology of Religion 20

2 The Sources of Religion 23

Revelation as Origin 24 The "Natural-Knowledge-of-God"
Explanation 25 Anthropological Explanations 26
Psychological Explanations 28 Sociological Views 30
Conclusion 36

3 *Becoming Religious* 37

Elements in Religious Socialization 38 Methods of Religious Socialization 40 The Effectiveness of Religious Socialization 42
Internalization of Religion 49 Religious Conversion 52
Conclusion 56

II *RELIGION AS SOCIAL ORGANIZATION*

4 *Religion as a Group Phenomenon* 61

Religion and the Characteristics of a Group 61 Religion and the Five Functional Prerequisites of Group Life 64 The Effects of Increasing Group Size 69 The Bureaucratization of Religion 71
The "Open Systems" Theory of Religion 74

5 *The Church-Sect Continuum of Religious Organization* 77

The Sect 77 The Church 79 The Denomination 80
The Formation of Sects 81 The Impact of Deprivation on Sect Development 83 The Evolution of Sects 86 The Cult 92
Jim Jones's Peoples Temple as Cult 94 Refinements of the Church-Sect Typology 99

III *RELIGION IN SOCIETY*

6 *Religion and Politics* 105

The Relationship of Religion and Politics 106 The Influence of Religion on Politics 108 Civil Religion 120 Religion and Politics in the Third World 123

7 *Religion and the Economy* 126

Religion as an Economic Institution 126 Religion as a Shaper of Economic Attitudes and Behavior 128 An Assessment of the Relationship between Religion and Economics 138

8 *Religion and the Class System* 142

Differences in Religious Meaning and Expression among Social Classes 143 Differential Denominational Affiliation by Social Class 146 Social Stratification within Religious Groups 152
Stratification, Religion, and Race 153

9 *Women and Religion* 163

The Relationship of Women to Religion in Historical Perspective 164 The Historic Patterns 165 The Challenges to Traditional Patterns 171 Conclusion 183

IV RELIGION IN AMERICA

10 *Major Historical Developments* 187

Intolerant Beginnings 187 The Constitutional Compromise 189
The Frontier Challenge 193 The Ordeal of Pluralism 196
Religious Social Concern 200 Growth of Fundamentalism 203
The Post-World War II Revival 207

11 *Black Religion in America* 212

The Historical Development of the Black Church as a Social Institution 212 Militancy in the Black Church 220 New Themes in Black Religion 227

12 *Denominational Society* 231

The Multiplicity of Groups 231 The Diversity of Groups 232
Major Denominational Families 234 Ecumenism 248
The Continued Viability of Denominationalism 253

13 *The Future of Religion* 257

Level of Religious Activity 258 Continuity in the Traditional
Social Functions of Religion 266 The Factor of Secularization 269

The Conflict over the Purpose of Religion	274	The Continuing
Traditional Theological Controversy	278	New Religious
Movements and Cults	281	

APPENDIX

How to Measure Religion 289

Introduction	289	Sociological Definitions of Religiosity: Group	
Affiliation	291	Sociological Definitions of Religiosity: The	
Individual Approach	294	Sociological Measures of Religiosity:	
Multidimensional Measures	297	Sociological Definitions of	
Religiosity: The Intrinsic-Extrinsic Distinction	300	Sociological	
Definitions of Religiosity: The Open-ended "Ultimate Concern"			
Approach	301	Conclusion	302

Index 305

I

*INTRODUCTION
TO THE SOCIOLOGY
OF RELIGION*

I

THE END OF THE WORLD

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'THE END OF THE WORLD'

AND 'THE END OF THE WORLD'

I

The Sociological Perspective

Religion is a social phenomenon and is in an interactive relationship with the other social units that constitute a society. This seemingly obvious assertion, which lies at the very foundation of the sociology of religion, is actually not nearly so simple as it may seem. Nor is it so readily accepted as one might expect.

Many people, particularly the religiously committed, think of religion in an entirely different way. Some prefer to see religion as the context of people's communion with the supernatural, and religious experience as something outside ordinary experience, while others see religion as an expression of an instinctual reaction to cosmic forces. Still others see religion as an explicit set of messages from a deity. These viewpoints certainly de-emphasize, or ignore, or even reject the sociological dimensions of religion. Nevertheless, whether we are talking about religion in general, or a particular religious family such as Christianity or Buddhism, or a specific religious group such as the Four Square Gospel Tabernacle, religion will be seen to interact with other social institutions and forces in society and will follow and illustrate sociological principles and laws.

In other words, whatever else it is (or is not), religion is a social phenomenon and as such is in a continual reciprocal, interactive relationship with other social phenomena. That, in brief, is what the sociology of religion is all about; and this book is basically concerned with the specification and elaboration of this point in a variety of dimensions and on a number of levels.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE
SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Asserting that religion is a social phenomenon suggests several things. In the first place the statement has a *nonevaluative intent*. Thus we are not going to be able to, or even want to, speak about the truth or falsity of religion. Speaking of religion in terms of the good, the true, and the beautiful may be worthwhile and even stimulating for philosophers and theologians—or anyone, for that matter (even sociologists); but such considerations have nothing to do with sociology. Sociology that claims to describe reality accurately demands that its practitioners approach their subjects—religion no less than any other (and perhaps more than most)—with all the neutrality and objectivity they can muster.

Of course, no sociologist can always (if ever) be perfectly neutral and objective with regard to his or her subject, let alone one so value laden and emotionally charged as religion. Recent studies in the sociology of knowledge, as well as honest discussions that have punctured the myth of a “value-free” sociology, have been sufficient to discourage any such pretensions. Nonetheless, a conscious, deliberate striving for neutrality and objectivity must be present—indeed, it should be evident—in any sociological investigation.

The sociology of religion is also *empirical*—it can only study and reach conclusions about phenomena that are observable. In order to confirm or refute any particular theory, the sociologist must test that theory with relevant empirical observations, or *data*. And since data are by their nature limited to the observable, the measurable, the quantifiable, whatever elements of religion are spiritual or supernatural, in the sense that they cannot be seen with the eye or otherwise measured or recorded, are by definition beyond the purview of sociology.

Our characterization of the sociology of religion so far, as objective and empirical, can be summed up by stating that the sociology of religion is conducted according to the *scientific method*. By the scientific method we mean (1) the systematic search for verifiable data (“facts”) firmly rooted in prior knowledge and theoretical formulations, (2) the production of evidence as opposed to hearsay, opinion, intuition, or common sense, and (3) the following of procedures that others can verify and replicate (reproduce under essentially identical conditions).

It is at this point that the sociologist of religion encounters probably the most strenuous objection from the religiously committed, which usually runs something like this: Since religion relates primarily to the supernatural—that is, to forces that are usually unseen—and involves matters of the heart as well, anything the sociologist can say about religion, limited as he or she is to describing the observable, will be at best superficial and unimportant, at worst false and misleading. J. Milton Yinger has supplied some useful imagery in speaking to this issue. He frames the objection to the empirical study of reli-

gion with the question, "How is it possible to see a stained-glass window from the outside?"¹ That is, the beauty and the message or picture of a church's stained-glass window is visible only when one is *inside* and can see the sunlight shining through. Professor Yinger goes on to note, however, that the view from the inside constitutes only part of what can be learned about the window. Only from the outside, for example, can the viewer appreciate the exterior framework or context within which that window exists. Furthermore, there are, as Yinger suggests, pieces of information potentially important to understanding the significance of the window that have nothing to do with viewing it from the inside (or from the outside, for that matter): who built it, who installed it, who provides for its repair, who goes in to view it from the inside. We can also consider the reason it was installed, what "outsiders" think of it, how it resembles or differs from other windows, whether the style of newer windows is the same or is changing, and so on.

Rather than belabor the obvious parallel that we are suggesting between this situation and the study of religion, it is enough to note that questions like these can be answered empirically, that they are important questions, and that the answers to them amplify our understanding. Granted, empirical data do not constitute the only information of any importance about religion. Nor can we claim that empirical or observable measures of religion reveal its "essence." Studying religion empirically places a certain restriction on our enterprise—but no more severe a restriction than is placed on the position of those who claim religion to be strictly concerned with spiritual matters and therefore off-limits to empirical investigation. Each "side" of this issue can contribute to an understanding of the total phenomenon.

CENTRAL SOCIOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Having established that the scientific study of religion is a legitimate endeavor, it remains for us to indicate why, for the sociologist, it is an important one—that is, how it furthers sociology's task of attempting to understand the dynamics of people living in groups. For this purpose it will be helpful to identify some of the central assumptions of sociology, whether applied to the study of religion, the family, the class system, the division of labor, or any other social phenomenon.

The Sociological Perspective

In the first place, what exactly *is* sociology? Very briefly stated, sociology is the study of the interaction of people in groups and of the influence of those groups on human behavior generally and on society's other institutions

¹ J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 2.

and groups. Thus sociology has a twofold goal: (1) understanding the dynamics of group life—what groups are, how they function, how they change, how they differ from one another; and (2) understanding the influence of groups on individual and collective behavior. One fundamental assumption of sociology implied by this is that all human activity is influenced by groups. Throughout a person's lifetime groups impinge on his or her biological "raw material," shaping it, modifying it, influencing it—*socializing* it, to use the sociologists' term. This process begins with the family and proceeds through the hundreds of educational, associational, peer, and work groups that a person participates in and has contact with throughout his or her lifetime.

In both fundamental senses of the sociological enterprise—explaining group dynamics and explaining group influence—religion qualifies perfectly as a field of sociological study and analysis. Leaving aside for now the question of whether religion is also (or even primarily) an individual phenomenon, it is obviously at least a group phenomenon. Thus to the extent that religions organize themselves into groups—congregations, denominations, dioceses, cells, fellowships, and so on—an important task for sociology is the study of the structure and functioning of these groups simply *as groups*. In other words, we want to determine how and to what extent religious groups follow sociological laws governing group life in general. In what ways does a congregation, for example, operate like any other voluntary association—like, say, the League of Women Voters? Or how and to what degree do major religious denominations function like other large bureaucracies—like, say, General Motors, or the United States Army?

Insofar as religion is organized into groups, it exerts influences not only on its members, but also on nonmembers and on other groups and institutions. The second dimension of our preliminary definition of sociology—as a study of group influence—thus suggests that religious groups have at least the potential for influencing people just as do groups that center around one's family, peers, or workplace. The question is not so much *whether* such influence exists but *to what degree, in what ways, and how it can be measured*.

Human Nature

A number of assumptions in sociology center around the definition of human nature. Here we shall emphasize three of these assumptions.

First, and perhaps most obviously, a human being is a *biological organism*—a creature with physiological drives, needs, potentials, and limitations. The socializing influence of groups is thus both directed at and limited by biological factors. Religion is of course among those socializing agents that attempt to influence or modify biological nature. For example, different religious groups have different approaches to, and provide or allow different outlets for, sexual drives. And insofar as people in fact internalize these different emphases—whether they be permissive, compensatory, restrictive, or whatever—to that

extent people will have different personalities and evidence different values and attitudes. In short, although the sociological perspective rejects notions of biological determinism, it recognizes as openly as possible that the human being has potentialities and limitations that are biologically provided.

Another sociological assumption regarding human nature that is worth mentioning is the apparently unique *ability of people to symbol*. By this we mean the ability arbitrarily to attach specific meanings to things, sounds, words, acts—meanings which are not intrinsic to the items themselves but which people have created. By establishing consensus on these meanings, groups are able to communicate and to accumulate knowledge. Using language as the prime symbolic mechanism, people can deal with abstract concepts and emotions, such as love, justice, and equality as easily as they can ask someone to pass the potatoes at the dinner table.

The ability to express meanings symbolically is primarily responsible for the variety of groups, cultures, ideologies, and technologies throughout history. There is no activity in which people are engaged that does not involve acts of symbolizing—whether lecturing, voting, making love, or “being religious.” Religion in fact consists entirely of symbols and of activities that are interpreted and mediated by symbols. This is true whether the symbols have empirical referents or not. God, hell, salvation, Star of David, nirvana, guru, mana—all have meaning to those initiated into a particular symbolic system. The meaning of each of these is not inherent in the word itself, or in the combination of sounds, but is supplied by the believer. Even if divine truths have been revealed to people by a supernatural being, those truths have been expressed in human language, or are immediately translated into human language—otherwise the message would have no meaning for people.

Yet another primary sociological assumption about human nature is that *people become human only in groups*—admittedly, a dramatic way of stating that the influence of groups on the human organism through socialization is crucial and far-reaching. We do not propose to debate the academic question of whether the newborn babe is in fact human. The point is simply that the newborn infant is not yet very much of what it is going to become, and that what it does become will be largely attributable to socializing influences. One of those socializing influences is religion, which in fact affects everyone, whether or not they are born into a “religious” family, or attend Sunday school, or are married by a member of the clergy, and so on. For religion also exerts an indirect influence on people, if only in an inverse way as a negative reference group or through its influence on secular institutions.

*Human Action Is Directed toward
Problem Solving*

A fundamental assumption of sociology is that *every human action is in some form and to some degree a problem-solving act or mechanism*. Whether

working at a job, getting married, planning a party, or genuflecting, the human being is engaged in the process of solving or resolving some existing (present) or anticipated (future) problem. The problem may be how to satisfy a biological need for nourishment, how to achieve victory on the athletic field, or how to get God to help you pass an exam this afternoon. In any case, the person perceives a problem that he or she must solve, either now or, if he or she fails to take appropriate action, in the future.

Religious behavior is problem-solving like any other social activity. Praying, attending church services, observing religious laws, and having and talking about “mountaintop experiences,” for example, are all religious activities that contribute in some way (at least from the perspective of the religious participant) toward solving a problem, either existing or anticipated. Note that we are not suggesting (or denying) that religion in fact either solves problems or creates them. Rather, our point is that people often engage in religious activities *in the belief* that such behavior can solve problems. Lest there be any misunderstanding, once again we shall emphasize that throughout this book no attempt is made to determine or question the truth or falsity, the efficacy or inefficacy, of religion in general, of any specific religion in particular, or of anyone’s personal religious beliefs. Engaged as we are in sociological investigation, we are concerned solely with what can be observed, including what people *believe* exists and happens.

All Social Phenomena Are Interrelated

The final sociological assumption that we need to clarify before delving in detail into the sociology of religion is that *all social phenomena within a given group or society are interrelated*. That is, all social phenomena are continually interacting, and every part becomes linked with every other in at least an indirect way. More specifically, part A may not be influenced directly by part F, but F may be having some indirect influence through a chain of other factors or social phenomena called B, C, D, and E. Most important for our purposes, religion interacts with—is in a dynamic reciprocal relationship with—every other social phenomenon and process. Religion both influences them and is influenced by them; religion both acts and reacts, is both an independent variable and dependent variable, both cause and effect. This principle of the continual dialectic involving religion and other social phenomena is a central theme of this book, for determining the nature and extent of these mutual influences are key tasks in the sociology of religion.

We have now identified in at least an introductory way what sociology is. Now, what is *religion*—the second term in our subject, the Sociology of Religion?