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■ **Religion**  
**in Sociological Perspective**

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**Keith A. Roberts**

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# Religion in Sociological Perspective

**Keith A. Roberts**

*Bowling Green State University,  
Firelands College*



1984

**THE DORSEY PRESS**  
Homewood, Illinois 60430

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ISBN 0-256-03127-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 83-71605

*Printed in the United States of America*

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 K 1 0 9 8 7 6 5

# Religion in Sociological Perspective

*The Dorsey Series in Sociology*  
*Consulting Editor*  
*Charles M. Bonjean*  
*The University of Texas at Austin*

### **Dedication:**

To my mother, Elizabeth W. Roberts, who first gave me a sense of the importance of religion in life and who encouraged a rigorous application of reason and empiricism to religion; and to my wife, Judy, whose constant support, advice, and understanding has made this book possible.

# Preface

This book is designed as a concise introduction to the sociology of religion. My intent has been to present and illustrate the basic theories sociologists use to understand the social dimensions of religion. I seek first and foremost to help students understand the *perspective* from which sociologists view religion. By the time students have finished this book, they should understand the central theories and methods of research in the sociology of religion, and they should have an idea of how to apply these analytical tools to new groups they encounter. The goal of this text is to be *illustrative* rather than all-encompassing.

I have written this volume so that it will be comprehensible to the general public, but I have assumed that the primary audience will be students in courses on "Religion and Society" or "The Sociology of Religion." Insofar as it is adopted as a text, I have assumed that it will be complemented with monographs or anthologies that explore the specific groups or specific processes the instructor chooses to emphasize. That is one reason I have worked to keep the text relatively short. I have also anticipated that my primary audience will be seminary students and undergraduates—especially at colleges and universities that emphasize the liberal arts "general education" function. I have asked open-ended questions which challenge students to think about their own values and perspectives, as well as requiring them to think about sociological methods and theories. I have also student-tested each chapter for readability and clarity among nonsociologists and added diagrams to aid in comprehension. In short, I have assumed that readers have no sociology background beyond perhaps an introductory course. (Having co-taught a "Religion and Society" course at a seminary, I am aware that some students take sociology of religion courses with no sociology background.)

The theoretical perspective of this book is eclectic. I seek to help students recognize the contributions of various theoretical perspectives and the blind-spots of each. Conflict and functional theories are used throughout the text, but discussion of specific processes includes a wide range of other theories. These range from phenomenology and cognitive structuralism to symbolic interactionism. I have also tried to provide students with an under-



standing of the relationship between research methods and findings. (Often as sociologists we don't deal with methodological issues until the "methods course" for majors.) Without belaboring the issue of methods, I have attempted to make students aware of these issues and have purposefully reported studies which use each type of research methodology.

In writing this text I have been careful to use sex-inclusive language. However, an author faces a dilemma when quoting those who wrote at a time when this was not a consideration. In most cases, I have modified the language of those I cited so that the text is consistent and avoids nouns and pronouns that seem to exclude women. However, in a few cases, such changes would have involved such convoluted sentence structure and such awkward phrasing that I left the passages intact.

The opening chapter of this text introduces the sociological perspective including its assumptions, its methods of investigation, and its limitations. The second chapter explores the definition of religion and suggests ways in which sociologists have sought to measure "religiosity." Chapter 3 involves a rather detailed introduction to functional and conflict perspectives and discusses the relationships between religion and the larger society. Chapter 4 sets forth an internal analysis of elements of religion (rituals, beliefs, symbols, mystical experiences, and world-views). This includes a discussion of the integration of these elements and the conflict between them. The fifth chapter investigates the processes of conversion and commitment, focusing rather substantially on recent studies of religious cults and the commitment of their devotees. Several models for understanding conversion and commitment are set forth. Although most students view religion as a set of values or beliefs, religion is also a set of ordered social relationships—an institution. It is to this issue that we turn in Chapter 6 as we discuss the routinization of charisma, the dilemmas of institutionalization, and the mobilization of resources. In the seventh chapter, students are provided with tools for the analysis of specific religious groups. Rather than providing a simple definition of such controversial terms as *sect* or *cult*, I have provided background on the development of these concepts and have demonstrated the various ways they have been used. I have found in my own teaching that this calls for careful discussion so that confusion does not reign, but the dividends can be rewarding. When students recognize that a single term has more than one meaning among sociologists, they learn to read monographs and other reports more discriminatingly. Chapters 8 and 9 demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between religion and society. The explicit focus of Chapter 8 is "religion and stratification," but the underlying theme is that religion can be both cause and effect of secular social processes. The topic of Chapter 9 is religion and prejudice (racial and sexual), but the underlying issue is a demonstration of the fact that religion may affect social processes in a multiplicity of ways. In fact, religion may simultaneously contribute to *and* combat a particular attitude or social



process. For example, while some religious beliefs may combat prejudice, religious institutional structures and religious reference groups may contribute to it. Chapter 10 is devoted to a discussion of contemporary religious trends, including substantial discussion of "invisible" forms of religion and civil religiosity.

There is substantial value to texts which have interchangeable chapters, for they allow the instructor flexibility in designing the course. What a text gains in flexibility, however, it often loses in cumulative application of theory. While it is possible to vary the order of the chapters in this text, the text is designed to be cumulative. Each chapter is more complex in its analysis than the one before, and each succeeding chapter attempts to stretch students to greater levels of analytical sophistication. If an instructor does choose to use these chapters in a different sequence, I recommend that the first three chapters be covered first as a foundation, with other chapters altered as one wishes. In any case, the section on structuralism in Chapter 5 should be covered prior to reading Chapter 9. Instructors might also be alert to the fact that Chapters 4 and 5 utilize somewhat more functional theory, while Chapters 8 and 9 expose students to relatively more conflict theory.

While only one name goes on the book cover, a project of this nature is enriched by the labors and support of many people. I would like to thank the Bowling Green Faculty Research Committee for support in researching Chapter 9. I am deeply appreciative of the assistance offered by librarians of Bowling Green State University and especially that provided by Will Currie, Sherry Gray, and June Coughlin. I am also indebted to Katy Heyman for assistance in the library. Earlier drafts of this work have benefitted from the critical reading of Elizabeth Roberts, Linda Luck, and a number of students in my sociology of religion classes who have read selected chapters and offered specific feedback on readability and clarity. My reviewers deserve special comment for their incisive analysis, their helpful criticism, and their encouragement in this project. These reviewers were Richard Malchalek, Edgar W. Mills, Jr., Perry McWilliams, James D. Davidson, John S. Staley, and Chuck Bonjean. While all of these persons have contributed to the finished product, they are certainly not responsible for its flaws.

Finally, I must express my appreciation to my wife Judy and to my family. Judy has been enormously supportive, has typed several drafts of the manuscript, and has offered helpful comment and criticism. My three children have contributed in two ways: through their ability to provide delightful interludes away from the intensity of the project and through their patience on all those occasions when Daddy was at the typewriter rather than at the beach or playing ball.

**Keith A. Roberts**

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# A Scientific Perspective on Religion

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     Participant Observation  
     Survey Research and Statistical Analysis  
     Content Analysis  
 Summary

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At social affairs where a congenial atmosphere is desired, the social norm demands that two topics be avoided: religion and politics. These are topics about which many people have strong feelings and on which they are often not open to alternative views. In fact, a highly respected sociologist once said of religion: "There are few major subjects about which people know so little, yet feel so certain" (Yinger 1970:2). This seems to be true of both those who are sympathetic to religion and those who are hostile toward it. Yet, it is precisely this topic which we will be exploring in this book. Hence, at the outset of this study I would suggest two characteristics or attitudes which will be particularly helpful in approaching our topic of investigation: a healthy dose of humility and a corresponding openness to new ideas. No one has all the answers on religious behavior, but by listening to one another, we can each broaden our understandings.

In this text, I will be presenting the sociological perspective on religion and explaining some of that discipline's findings and theories. Sociology does not offer the whole truth any more than any other discipline or perspec-

tive, but it does offer insights that can be helpful to those interested in religion—whether they be believers or skeptics. My point is that we seek understanding here; a posture of defensiveness—with each person seeking only to preserve his or her own preconceived notions—is counterproductive. We seek neither to dissuade believers from their faith nor to convince skeptics of the efficacy of religion. Our goal is to gain a new perspective on religious behavior and thereby to expand our comprehension of religion.

Sociology offers only one of many possible vantage points from which to view religion. Perhaps an analogy would be helpful in clarifying the point.

Many people may interact with the same child and yet have quite different perspectives and understandings of that child. An artist may try to encapsulate the child's charm by focusing on his or her unique physical properties, such as facial features, body proportions, and shades of coloration in the eyes, skin, and hair. A doctor is interested in the physiological needs of the child and the requirements for good health—concentrating on such characteristics as height and weight, immunizations, and the family's history of congenital diseases. A developmental psychologist may study the child not because of an interest in the characteristics of this child but as part of a broader investigation of childhood development. This child is one case out of which a general theory of childhood maturation is sought.

Parents, of course, are interested in the uniqueness and specialness of this *particular* child. Their concern is not one of detached analysis, for the emotional attachment to the child changes the perception. As the persons responsible for the child's social and emotional development, they try to be concerned about the child's overall welfare. But because they are so close to the child, some important patterns of behavior may go unnoticed. The findings of each of the previous observers may be of interest to the parents as they come to a fuller appreciation of their child and a better understanding of their parental responsibilities. Of course, too, the child is a unique self-experiencing individual with his or her own self-understanding.

It would be foolish to ask which of these persons has the "true" understanding of the child. No one perspective is total and complete. In fact, the insights of the psychologist may influence the socialization practices of the parent, or the prescription of the doctor (for example, that the child needs to wear a back brace) may affect the child's behavior and experiences. In each case, the "objective" view of an outsider may differ from that of the parent or of the child, and it may lead to changes. But in the long run, those changes may be a good thing.

Just as people from many fields may have unique perspectives on a child—none of which contains the whole truth about that child—so also can religion be understood from many angles. The psychologist analyzes religious experience as a mental and emotional experience of the individual. The concern

is not with religion as ideas or beliefs which may hold eternal truth but with the effect of religion on the human psyche. The philosopher of religion approaches the subject by comparing, contrasting, and analyzing beliefs of various faiths, focusing on the ideas of life, death, suffering, and injustice among the many religions of the world. The systematic theologian formulates doctrines about God and about God's relationship to the universe and to humanity to place what is believed about God (in a particular tradition) into a logically comprehensive and coherent framework. The religious ethicist attempts to define moral responsibility of religious persons, or at least to clarify moral discourse and identify moral dilemmas for members of a faith. The faithful follower understands his or her religion through yet another lens—that of personal commitment. The person's faith is viewed as a source of ultimate truth and personal fulfillment. Members of the clergy also view religion from a vantage point as committed followers, but they are also leaders who constantly seek understanding of religious processes so they can be more effective in guiding others. Hence, they may use the insights of the social scientist, the philosopher, the theologian, and the ethicist in order to understand more fully both their faith and their leadership responsibilities. The sociologist, as we shall see, offers a unique perspective which differs from these others and which can contribute to a holistic understanding of this multidimensional phenomenon we call religion.

## The Sociological Perspective

The sociological approach focuses on religious groups and institutions (their formation, maintenance, and demise), on the behavior of individuals within those groups (social processes which affect conversion, ritual behavior), and on conflicts between religious groups (Catholic versus Protestant, Christian versus Moslem, mainline denomination versus cult). For the sociologist, beliefs are only one small part of religion.

In modern industrial society, religion is both a set of ideas (values, beliefs) and an institution (a set of social relationships). We will be looking at both in order to understand how they affect human behavior. We will investigate differences in beliefs not because we expect to prove their truth or falsehood, but because beliefs—regardless of their ultimate veracity—can influence how people behave and how they understand the world. Religious institutions, however, can also affect behavior quite independently of beliefs. In fact, religious institutions sometimes entice people to behave contrary to the official belief system of that religion.

Later in this book we will discuss the fact that religious organizations may contribute to racism and combat it at the same time. While the *belief systems* of most mainline denominations proclaim prejudice to be wrong, the institutional *structures* of the church unwittingly permit it—and some-



times even foster it. Furthermore, religious beliefs themselves can have contradictory effects. While some Christian teachings have maintained that antipathy against others is always wrong, certain other beliefs have contributed—often unconsciously and unintentionally—to racial prejudice, sex bias, and anti-Semitism. Many readers probably did not know, for example, that some 1st-century Christians believed that women were incapable of being saved—unless they were first transformed into men. These Gnostic Christians reinforced the accepted cultural view of that time that women are defective human beings. We will also find in this book that between A.D. 1400 and 1700, the Christian churches (both Protestant and Catholic) were involved in burning between 500,000 and 1 million women as witches. In fact, two towns in Europe in the late 1500s were left with only one female inhabitant each (discussed in Chapter 9). But this massive gynocide<sup>1</sup> was due much less to religious beliefs than to changing sex roles in the society. Secular conflicts (over the proper role of men and women) were expressed in “religious” activities (burning witches as infidels). Religious behavior can be either a cause or an effect of other social processes.

In short, there are many ways in which religious groups, religious values, and secular social processes can be interrelated. Beliefs are not always at the heart of religious behavior. Social scientists have found that persons sometimes become committed to new religious groups with little knowledge of the group’s beliefs. They become committed through group pressures and social processes (to be discussed in Chapter 5). Sociologists are convinced that knowing what a group believes provides insights only into one small part of this complex phenomenon we call religion. For a fuller understanding, one must comprehend the social processes as well.

Most Americans believe that the central differences between religious groups have to do with their beliefs, but there are many interesting and important variations in style of worship, authority structures, and psychological appeal of religious groups. The short descriptions in Exhibit 1-1 of three religious services illustrate some of the range of diversity.

Sociology, then, focuses on the *social* dimensions of religion—and on those aspects of religion affecting social behavior. Like the developmental psychologist who studies the child to discover the stages of personality development in all children, we will be looking for the common patterns—the general rules—rather than for unique characteristics of each religion. When we do look at unique characteristics, it is to find how those characteristics affect behavior in special ways.

This sociological perspective is characterized by two fundamental principles: reliance on empirical data and objectivity. By reliance on empirical data, the sociologist considers only data that are observable through the

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<sup>1</sup> Genocide is the annihilation or attempted annihilation of an entire people (such as the Nazi holocaust in Germany). Gynocide (*gyno* meaning women) is the attempted annihilation of the female sex.

## Exhibit 1-1

**Religion in America Varies in Content, in Style, and in Appeal**

Religion is a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon. We can gain some insight into the diversity of American religion simply by observing the religious services of various religious groups. Religion can be big business, or it can be a small group experience. It can appeal to emotions, to intellect, or to tradition. It may be geared to an authority figure, may encourage individual autonomy and independence, or may stress corporate responsibility and social action. The worship experience may be designed to create a mood of awe and of quiet meditation, or it may be devised to stimulate critical thinking and motivation to join a protest movement.

The following descriptions by William Martin allow us to vicariously attend three very different worship services in the heart of Texas. The first is that of a growing, evangelical Baptist church where thousands take the leap of faith. The second is a liberal Unitarian congregation where members look (and analyze) before they leap. The third description is of Yom Kippur services in a Reformed Jewish temple, where tradition and social responsibility are blended. These glimpses into American religiosity suggest considerable variation, yet these include only a small segment of the entire range. They represent only the more conventional expressions of religiosity in the United States.

Readers may find it instructive to list the various ways in which these religious groups differ in content, style, appeal, and source of authority.

**First Baptist [Appeal to the Heart]**

"This place in the eye of God is more favored than any other. It is from here, from our dear church, that we are all going to heaven." He knows his words are hyperbolic. He also knows he can get away with them, because he is Wallie Amos Criswell, pastor for 35 years of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, largest in its denomination and the apotheosis of Texas religion.

First Baptist has over 20,000 members, a weekly budget of approximately \$135,000, buildings and parking lots that sprawl over five city blocks, a staff of 256, a library of 30,000 volumes, and recreation facilities that include two gymnasias, a skating rink, bowling lanes, racquetball courts, Nautilus equipment, and a sauna. Among its dozens of programs are 21 choirs, 11 mission centers, an academy with a kindergarten-through-12th-grade enrollment of over 600, the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies with over 275 students pursuing two degrees of religious certitude, an FM radio station, and a Fellowship of Christian Truckers whose members minister at truck stops and terminals in Dallas County. First Baptist also produces one of the more notable worship services this side of the 19th century.

I knew the church had a 70-piece orchestra and a 175-voice choir, but I was not prepared for the processional. In a maneuver that is repeated each week, the musicians strolled casually to their places, picking up the strains of "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" as they settled in. Then, as I wondered why they hadn't coordinated things more smoothly, the orchestra was suddenly in place and a steady stream of tan-robed singers poured through four doors and the tympani pounded the cadence and the volume and intensity mounted so that when they reached the refrain—"I'm bound for the promised land"—I felt a tingle and an urge to shout, "Wait for me! I'm coming, too!"