

Preface

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There are many challenges to writing a textbook. Perhaps the greatest challenge, in this case, is to fairly and accurately represent an entire subdiscipline of sociology. As this is the eighth edition, this text has undergone numerous revisions and incorporates feedback from sociologists and students alike. One common critique we would like to address—common to textbooks like this—is that of too much focus on (American) Christianity and self-identified Christians. We understand that the world is a big place and religion exists well beyond Christian social phenomena. We also recognize that the discipline as a whole has been overly Christianity-centric for a very long time. There are, however, a few reasons that keeping Christianity (as both theory and practice) more centered than other faith traditions makes some sense.

First, this is not a world religions textbook. The goal here is not to learn about various religious traditions. Rather, we are learning about how and why we study religion from within the discipline of sociology. Second, the audience for this textbook is, by and large, American university students. So, it makes practical sense for a significant part of the data and examples we use to be from the religious traditions with which most students have some degree of familiarity. If, for example, we incorporated more Theravada Buddhism or animistic traditions from Mali, we would be obliged to spend precious pages in exposition of those traditions. Third, as sociology teachers, we want to help you better understand the world around you. In most cases, that means life in the United States—and Americans are a decidedly Christian people.

That said, while we know that this text skews toward Christianity for data and examples, we have also worked to be more universal in telling the story of religion from a sociological perspective. There is always room to improve, but there are practical reasons for our approach.

An Invitation to Students

Imagine you just dropped by a large dormitory or apartment complex where hundreds of your fellow students have been gathered all day to relax and socialize. (Some of you will require less imagination than others to conjure up this image.) There are dozens of groups of 3, 5, or 10 friends and acquaintances chatting away, with people constantly breaking off or breaking in to join new conversations. Some are quieter, some more animated. Some are very diverse—involved people from different genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and religions, perhaps even speaking different languages. But most are not. Some are, in fact, quite homogenous and exclusive, like those involving people who are allowed onto the balconies with the best views or at the best spots poolside or where the best food is being served.

Wanting to get the broadest and deepest understanding of what is going on, you make your way through the gathering quickly but systematically. You join as many conversations as you can, with as many different people as possible, being careful not to dwell too long in any single one. But you are only one person, and there is only so much time in the day, so you know you can only see a part of everything that happened. Try as you might, there are things you know you missed entirely. But you did your best.

We suggest that this scenario and your role in it is similar to the sociology of religion and our role as textbook authors. The sociology of religion is an extensive collection of conversations among scholars, some of which have been ongoing for decades. Some of these conversations are more privileged than others within the field, as are some voices within each conversation. This can lead to exclusions and omissions. Fortunately, these conversations are dynamic, not static. The sociology of religion as a field is constantly evolving as more and new voices join and new aspects of the social world emerge or are discovered. And as this is social science, the field *must* change as the social world changes.

Our role as textbook authors is to get into as many of these conversations as possible. We want to try to grasp and convey the current state of scholarship in various parts of the field, how it got to be that way, what might be missing, and where it could or should be going.

Given that we are three voices offering a survey of a vast field, we must try to understand each part fairly quickly, which often means partially. Nevertheless, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* attempts to capture the breadth and depth of these multiple, diverse, and complex conversations as faithfully as possible, even though we openly acknowledge the accumulated information captured here is neither complete nor final. It is in need of updating, even before you read this first page.

As you read and think about the ideas in this textbook, we hope you will imagine yourself becoming part of the ongoing conversations that define the sociology of religion. Although you first need to listen in order to hear what scholars have been saying about the various issues covered in these 14 chapters, you should also begin to develop your own perspective on the material. Of course, we hope you will learn to do this like a good sociologist of religion: in dialogue with past and present scholarship and the contemporary social world.

A Unique Program Supporting Teaching of Sociology

The original primary author of this textbook, Keith A. Roberts, was instrumental in the founding of a unique program to support and enhance the quality of college teaching. The SAGE Publishing Keith Roberts Teaching Innovations Award is designed to prepare a new generation of scholars within the teaching movement in sociology. Awardees are reimbursed for expenses incurred while attending the daylong American Sociological Association (ASA) Section on Teaching and Learning workshop held annually before the main ASA meetings. The awards are funded through the generosity of SAGE Publishing and many of its authors who donate a portion of their royalties.

Introduction to the Sociology of Religion

Before we delve too deeply into our topic, we must establish some common assumptions and understandings. The reader need not agree with the authors, but should at least know how the authors are approaching the sociological study of religion. This is the purpose of the first three chapters. We are laying the groundwork for a shared investigation.

In Chapter 1, we explore what we mean by religion and the importance of different definitions of “religion” as different “ways of seeing” a complex, multifaceted social phenomenon. Then, in Chapter 2, we survey the historical development of the sociology of religion from the founding of the discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century to today. Last, in Chapter 3, we examine what it means to take a social scientific approach to the study of religion, including the unique perspectives and methodological assumptions of sociology as a discipline.

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Chapter 1

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What Do We Mean by the Term *Religion*?

Chapter Outline

Substantive Definitions

Functional Definitions

A Symbolic Definition

Invisible Religion

Lived Religion

Spiritual but Not Religious?

The Concept of Religion as Employed in This Text

A Final Word about Definitions

Summary and Looking Forward

Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- What is religion? What makes something “religious”?
- Why might one’s definition of religion create blinders that cause one to include some but exclude other important phenomena?
- What does it mean to think of definitions as “tools” that are not true or false but more or less useful?
- What does the concept of invisible religion add to the conversation about how to define religion?
- How are religion and spirituality similar or different?

What do we mean by the term *religion*? What would seem to be one of the easiest questions to answer is actually one of the most complex. To students who have never studied the sociology of religion, the definition of religion may seem clear. Certainly everyone knows what religion is, right? Let's get on with more important issues! Yet we dare not be so hasty. Some definitions are so narrow and specific as to exclude Buddhism as a religion. Other definitions are so broad and inclusive that many social behaviors may be considered forms of religion—including patriotism, systematic racism, or any other core set of values and beliefs that provides an individual or community with a sense of worth and meaning in life.

We must begin our analysis, then, by exploring the question of what it is we intend to study. What, after all, is religion? We begin to answer this question by recognizing that how we define our subject matter sets boundaries on what are and are not considered legitimate topics or groups for analysis—on what will be included in our studies of “religion” and what will be excluded.

Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1993:1) notes that boundary-making is an essential process of social construction: “Separating entities from their surroundings is what allows us to perceive them in the first place. In order to discern any ‘thing,’ we must distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore.” To wit, he reminds us that “the very first act of the Creation was one of dividing . . . the first three days of Creation were devoted exclusively to making distinctions.” Definitions and their boundaries help us make order out of chaos.

An important implication of this approach is that definitions are not mirrors of reality to be judged as “true” or “false,” but are *tools* that can be seen by those who use them as more or less *useful* (Berger 1967). In this way, definitions of religion have been, are, and will be contested. As you read and think about the following ways in which social scientists have defined religion, consider which definitions you find more or less useful and why.

Substantive Definitions

Many sociologists employ *substantive* definitions of religion. This approach hinges on identifying the “substance” or “essence” of religion. Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor used this approach in 1873 when he defined religion as “belief in Spiritual Beings” (Tylor [1873] 1958:8). For many people, a reference to God or gods is an essential element in religion. The reason Tylor used the term *spiritual beings* is that many people worship their deceased ancestors. They have little or no concern about gods, as such, but their world is enlivened by many unseen beings. Hence, Tylor saw *spiritual beings* as a more inclusive term than *gods*. Some other scholars have reaffirmed Tylor's insistence that religion involves a belief in a Being or beings that are not encountered in normal empirical processes (Spiro 1966).

Trying to define the essence of religion is a difficult task. It becomes even harder if our definition is to be applied cross-culturally. In the Western world, we tend to view religion essentially as a matter of belief. In fact, some social scientists have attempted to measure the religiosity of people—the extent of their “religiousness”—by determining how orthodox they are. An orthodox person is one who believes in the traditional doctrines of a religion. However, in many cultures, religion is “not so much thought out as danced out” (Marett 1914:xxxi). That is to say, ritual and emotion are primary to religion, and belief is only secondary.

The study of traditional Native American religions shows that these faiths are expressed through tribal practices, prayer, and religious objects, not creeds, dogmas, or theologies (Gill 2004). Scholars studying Orthodox Judaism and Islam also consistently point out that a focus on behavior, rather than on beliefs and attitudes, is characteristic of those faiths (Aslan 2011; Cohen 1983; Moberg 1984).

Anthropologists studying non-Western cultures insist that emphasis on belief is a Western bias that causes investigators to miss the underlying impulses of many religions. For example, several observers maintain that any concept of a deity or superhuman beings is peripheral to Buddhism (Harvey 2019; Herbrechtsmeier 1993). So, a definition that emphasizes a belief in superhuman beings leaves doubt about whether Buddhism is a religion. Strictly speaking, many Buddhist gurus (who are not concerned with superhuman beings) would not be considered to be practicing religion. On the other hand, most common folks around the world who identify themselves as Buddhists do believe in superhuman beings (Orru and Wang 1992). What appears at first to be a simple definitional issue is on further reflection very complex.

Another definitional approach that tries to capture the essence of religion but avoids the requirement of a specific belief was first suggested in 1912 by Émile Durkheim ([1912] 1995), one of the founders of sociology as an academic discipline. Durkheim maintained that recognizing the division of life into sacred and profane realms allows us to identify religion in any culture. People around the world undergo a psychological shift when engaging in rituals involving sacred objects. This shift involves feelings of awe, fear, and/or majesty. The attitude differs from anything one encounters in the everyday life of these people.

Durkheim recognized that not all individual experiences of awe, fear, or majesty are religious in character. Religion, he maintained, is a communal activity. It involves a social group: “In all history we do not find a single religion without a Church” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:59). The experience of the sacred must fundamentally be a group experience if it is to be identified as religion. Durkheim’s formal definition, then, is that “religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:62).

This approach is helpful in a great many cases, and it avoids the problem of deciding which specific belief is intrinsically or inherently religious. Yet social scientists who have used this approach have often implied (if not asserted) a dualistic worldview. That is to say, life has a religious (sacred) dimension and a nonreligious (profane) dimension. For example, Durkheim insisted that

the religious life and the profane life cannot coexist in the same unit of time. It is necessary to assign determined days or periods to the first, from which all profane occupations are excluded.

. . . There is no religion, and, consequently, no society which has not known and practiced this division of time into two distinct parts. (Durkheim [1912] 1995:347)

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade concurred: “For religious [people], space is not homogeneous; he [or she] experiences interruptions in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others” (Eliade 1959:20). These spaces set apart as uniquely special have a sacred character.



Shoes Outside a Mosque

In Islam the inside of the mosque is holy ground, and Muslims recognize this extraordinariness and sacredness by removing their shoes when they enter.

Photo by Emloren, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

While it is true that many people organize their life experiences into separate categories, not all do. As we will see later in this chapter, many sociologists of religion have come to question whether a strong distinction between sacred and profane realms of life is useful or whether it creates a false dichotomy. Thomas Luckmann's (1967) concept of invisible religion, Nancy Ammerman's (2014) efforts to find religion in everyday life, and the growth of spirituality (as opposed to or in conjunction with religion) (NORC at the University of Chicago 2021), are all ways of challenging the drawing of a bright line between sacred and profane aspects of life.

Highlighting the ongoing efforts of sociologists to define their object of study, Christian Smith (2017) has recently offered yet another substantive definition of religion. Smith focuses not on superhuman *beings* but on superhuman *powers*:

Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad. (Smith 2017:22)

Although Smith does highlight some of what religion *does* (the core of functional definitions, as we will see), his inclusion of superhuman powers limits the practices that can be seen as religious.

An underlying question in this whole debate, then, is whether by definition religion includes only that which has an otherworldly or supernatural or superhuman dimension. What about people whose ultimate value and deepest commitment is to their countries? They have a deep sense of loyalty to their land and will even give their lives to defend it. Their country's way of life provides a profound sense of meaning, purpose, and value. They may shed tears when their national anthem is played. Is this religious behavior? Can nationalism be a form of religion? It is not otherworldly, and it is not essentially supernatural (but see Chapter 13 on "civil religion"). Certainly these individuals feel a sort of sacredness toward the nation. Yet this sacredness does not involve the same fear and trembling that Rudolf Otto (1923) and Durkheim ([1912] 1995)

describe as part of the sacred attitude. How does the feeling of awe and reverence toward a nation differ from the awe and reverence toward a supernatural being or transcendent realm? Is this difference significant enough to call one experience religious and the other not? These are not easy questions to answer.

Some scholars feel that nationalistic behavior, as described earlier, *is* religious in character and that a broader definition of religion is appropriate. As we will address in various sections of this book, the growing manifestations of Christian Nationalism provide a potential challenge to Otto's definition (Gorski and Perry 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Indeed, one prominent scholar suggests that we simply focus on the sociology of the sacred, even if the behavior is not "religion" in the strictest sense, since anything that is considered "sacred" is likely to interest the sociologist of religion (Demerath 2000).

A major criticism of substantive definitions is that they tend to focus the researcher's attention solely on traditional forms of religion. Substantive definitions direct our attention to the sacred places and practices where we typically expect to find religion. This limits our ability to see people being religious in new ways (like the idea of "lived religion" in this chapter) and to find religion in new places (outside "God boxes," as we say in Chapter 12). Substantive definitions are felt to be too narrow and too tradition-bound, hence blinding researchers to these new modes of religiosity (Dobbelaere and Lauwers 1973).

Functional Definitions

Functional definitions are an alternative to substantive definitions of religion. These tend to be much more inclusive of diverse forms of "religion" and, therefore, better able to capture some of the nontraditional forms of religion that substantive definitions miss. Milton Yinger offered one such definition. He suggested that we focus not on what religion essentially *is* but on what it *does* (Yinger 1970). Yinger proposed that we define a social phenomenon as religious if it fulfills the manifest function of religion. (Manifest functions are the *conscious* and *intended* functions of a social pattern or institution; latent functions are unconscious and unintended [Merton 1968].) He asserted that meaning in life is a basic human need, although the nature and intensity of that need will vary among individuals.

Theologian Paul Tillich has described religion as that which is one's "ultimate concern." Yinger drew on Tillich's understanding in developing his own definition. The underlying conviction is that a fundamental concern of human beings is to understand the purpose of life and the meaning of death, suffering, evil, and injustice (Tillich 1957). In line with this conviction, Yinger wrote, "Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life" (Yinger 1970:7). Religion helps individuals cope by explaining these challenges and by providing a strategy to overcome despair, hopelessness, and futility.

Using this type of definition, the range of phenomena that we analyze under the heading *religion* is considerably expanded. Yinger insisted that nontheistic—that is, not involving a god—and even non-supernatural systems of belief and practice can be appropriate subjects of

inquiry for the sociologist of religion. “It is not the nature of *belief*, but the nature of *believing* that requires our study” (Yinger 1970:11). Wherever one sees a closing of the gap between fact and hope, wherever one sees a leap of faith that allows a person to assert that suffering and evil will somehow be defeated, there one sees the manifestations of religion.

Even a secular faith that science and technology will ultimately solve all our problems is, by this definition, a religious phenomenon. Yinger wrote, “A term that already includes, by common consent, the contemplations of a Buddhist monk and the ecstatic visions of a revivalist cult member, human sacrifice, and ethical monotheism may have room in it for science *as a way of life*” (Yinger 1970:12). Intense faith in nationalism, in capitalism, and in other objects of deep loyalty may be considered by the student of religion if the object is expected eventually to solve the ultimate human perplexities over the purpose of life and the meaning of death, injustice, and suffering. Yinger argued that if a narrower definition is utilized, one may misidentify (or even miss entirely) religion, particularly in societies undergoing significant cultural change.



Scientists in the Lab

In modern society, a sharp distinction is often drawn between religion and science, but Yinger's broad functional definition of religion suggests that faith in and the practice of science may be a form of religion itself.

Photo by Bill Branson for National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)

This functional definition assumes that all people are to some extent religious. Yinger wrote, “To me, the evidence is decisive: human nature abhors a vacuum in systems of faith”; of the profound cultural changes happening in 1960s America, he insisted, “This is not, then, a period of religious decline but is one of religious change” (Yinger 1970:vii). Sociologist Christian Smith echoes this perspective in his *Moral, Believing Animals: Humans seek a moral*

ordering system (Smith 2009). Functional definitions of religion do not invite the question of whether a society is becoming less religious, but rather ask what new forms religion is taking. The sociologist adopting this approach is less likely to overlook nontraditional or alternative forms of religion or new developments in the ways that people practice religion, especially younger generations.

Another well-known functional definition of religion is Robert Bellah's view that religion is "a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate [people] to the ultimate conditions of [their] existence" (Bellah 1970c:21). Like Yinger's, Bellah's view of religion was influenced by the theologian Tillich's perspective on "ultimate concern." One problem with these functional definitions is that "ultimate concern" or "ultimate conditions of existence" are difficult phenomena to identify. (They are even more difficult to measure using the empirical methods of social science as we will see in Chapter 3.) Nevertheless, Yinger's and Bellah's definitions suggest that any system of belief and action that addresses the fundamental questions of meaning in life is a religion.

In response to these functional definitions, some scholars have argued that if a definition of religion does not include a supernatural dimension, the term *religion* may become so inclusive that it is virtually meaningless (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Stark and Finke 2000). They advocate substantive definitions, even with their limitations, for this reason.

Critical Thinking: Consider your own presuppositions: Is a belief in a god or the supernatural necessary when you use the term *religion*? Is the fact that something is helping individuals address what is of ultimate concern enough to make that thing a religion?

A Symbolic Definition

You may have noticed that the strengths and weaknesses of substantive and functional definitions of religion are, to some extent, mirror images of each other. Consequently, some scholars have attempted to offer more comprehensive definitions of religion. Their hope is to capitalize on the strengths of both substantive and functional definitions and thereby avoid both of their weaknesses. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic definition of religion is one such effort.

Geertz begins by recognizing that *symbols*—objects, behaviors, or stories that represent or remind one of something else—are powerful forces in human behavior. They are also central to religion. Given the abstract nature of the focal point of religion, symbols become its indispensable medium. Symbols include objects (e.g., the cross, the Star of David), behaviors (e.g., touching the mezuzah on the doorpost of a Jewish home before entering; kneeling, facing Mecca, and praying five times a day), and myths or stories (e.g., Siddhartha Gautama achieving enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree and becoming the Buddha; Jesus washing his disciples' feet).

Geertz was impressed with the way in which various levels of meaning can be communicated through symbols. Moreover, symbols are more accessible to observation than subjective

experiences of “ultimate concern.” Hence, he used symbols as the starting point for his definition of religion:

Religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1973:90)

This definition is so fully and carefully developed that each of its four components deserves close examination.

First of all, to say that religion is a “system of symbols which acts” means the symbols provide a blueprint for understanding the world. Symbols provide a model of the world by helping people understand what the world and life really are. Many people believe, for example, that life is actually a testing ground in which God determines one’s fitness to live in the heavenly kingdom. These individuals live their lives with reference to this understanding. These symbols not only suggest a model *of* the world, but they also propose a model *for* the world (Geertz 1973:93). The symbol system describes what life *is* and also prescribes what it *ought* to be. Not only do many assert that life is a testing ground, but they claim access to the answers that will help them pass the test.

This system of symbols acts to “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in people. In other words, the symbols affect one’s disposition. Religious activity influences two somewhat different types of dispositions: (1) moods and (2) motivations. Geertz suggested that moods involve depth of feeling, whereas motivations provide a direction for behavior. Moods vary in intensity, and they affect our total outlook on life, but they are not aimed at any particular goal. One simply experiences a mood; one does not gain a feeling of obligation about a specific goal to be attained from a mood. Some born-again Christian groups emphasize that to be a Christian is to be joyful, even in the face of adversity. The emphasis is on a pervasive mood that characterizes the believer, regardless of the specific circumstances.

Some religions may emphasize moods as primary (in Buddhism the focus is on mystical experience), while other religions stress motivations and a system of ethics (the Unitarian Universalist Association illustrates this latter focus). Nonetheless, Geertz suggested that in all religions the symbol system produces moods that intensify commitment and motivations to act in specified ways. In another context, Geertz referred to the moods and motivations together as the *ethos* of the religion.

Not only do the symbol systems enhance a particular disposition, but they also act to “formulate conceptions of a general order of existence.” A distinguishing characteristic of religion is that it provides a worldview, a mental ordering of concepts such as nature, self, society, and the supernatural. Religion not only creates intense feelings but also establishes a cosmology—an understanding of the origin of the universe and humankind—that satisfies one’s intellectual need for reasonable explanations. Geertz emphasized that not all intense feelings of awe are religious. One may be overwhelmed by powerful emotions (moods) in viewing natural beauty or a work of art, but such feelings may be either purely aesthetic or deeply religious. If no explanatory perspective or overview of the meaning of life is involved, the experience is not religious (Geertz 1958).

There are three major challenges to the meaningfulness of life that a religious worldview must resolve: (1) a sense of coherence and reasonableness of life events; (2) a sense of meaning in suffering so that it becomes sufferable; and (3) a sense of moral order in which evil will be overcome and that virtue, goodness, and justice will somehow, someday prevail. Symbol systems, then, attempt to “account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience” (Geertz 1973:108). The worldview represents an intellectual process by which people can affirm that life makes sense, that suffering is bearable, and that justice is not a mirage—that in the end, good will be rewarded.

Geertz continued his definition by attempting to answer the question of how a particular worldview or set of concepts comes to be believed. The symbols act to “clothe those conceptions in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973:100). How is it that despite common sense, everyday experience, and empirical evidence, people will come to believe irrational and unsupportable things? What compels a Christian Scientist to deny the reality of illness, even though the person experiences the symptoms of influenza? Why does a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that a new revelation was written to Joseph Smith on golden plates, even though no one could read them but Smith? Why do Christians affirm that Jesus is the son of God even though he died in the manner of a criminal 2,000 years ago? Geertz pointed out that religious ritual often creates a situation in which people can reach a deeper reality. People experience or understand truths are more profound than everyday experience provides.



Revival Meeting

Religion is communal in character and often involves intense emotional experiences. The photo depicts a congregation worshipping with their pastors at a revival meeting. The intense emotional experience acts to clothe religious concepts in what Clifford Geertz calls “an aura of factuality” that makes these concepts “seem uniquely realistic.”

Gerripix/iStock

Geertz's definition is both abstract and quite elaborate. In fact, his explanation of the definition is over 40 pages long. A clear strength of his definition is that it contributes to the debate over what distinguishes religion from other cultural phenomena. His central contributions are that religion must include a symbol system that acts to reinforce both a worldview and an ethos and that has a built-in system of believability or plausibility.

In the end, Geertz's analysis is really more than a definition. It is an essay on how religion "works" to reinforce itself and on what religion "does" in the society. Because of its focus on what religion does, the symbolic definition may be considered one type of functional definition (Berger 1974), but one which includes a strong substantive component.

Before moving on, we want to include a quick note here about language—that is, about how we talk about religion sociologically. In Geertz's definition of religion, we find a common discourse—that of religion "acting" in the world. From the worst human behaviors to the most benevolent, religion is frequently bestowed with a form of agency that allows us to blame or laud religion for what are really the acts of people. From the agnostic perspective that social scientists should adopt in their work, religions include various sets of ideas from which people draw inspiration to act. Religion itself does not act in the world. We could push this idea to suggest that religion would not exist if people did not enact their beliefs in and inspirations from those systems. We want to remember that religions are maintained, are transformed, and even sometimes die out because of people's choices and subsequent actions.

Why does this matter? To consider religious systems as independent actors is to reify them—that is, to ignore their historic and ongoing social construction. This runs contrary to fundamental sociological theory. A reified religious system is one that is static, even monolithic. By way of example, the proliferation of American Protestant churches (see Chapter 6) reminds us we cannot consider "Christianity" as a single, monolithic actor—it is a dynamic religion composed of a multitude of peoples, histories, and cultures. And the same is true for all religions.

No religion is monolithic. Religious systems change over time, as people and their orientation toward religious systems change. Specific religious institutions (comprised of people) or members of a religious community may act, but entire religions do not. This specificity of language helps us avoid inaccurate and potentially harmful generalizations

Critical Thinking: What symbols elicit strong moods and motivations for you? Are those symbols "religious"? Does Geertz's symbolic definition allow you to distinguish between religious and other motivating symbols?

Invisible Religion

Another definitional issue that emerges in our consideration here is whether private systems of belief are to be called religion. After all, many individuals have beliefs that solve problems of ultimate meaning for them but that are not necessarily shared with others. Yinger insisted, as

do most sociologists of religion, that religion is a “social phenomenon: it is shared and takes on many of its most significant aspects only in the interaction of the group” (Yinger 1970:10). An overly communal conception of religion, however, runs the risk of overlooking newer forms of religiosity that are not centered on traditional religious groups and organizations.

A number of contemporary scholars have emphasized the modern individualization of religion. Each individual in modern society constructs their own meaning system by drawing on many traditions. Thomas Luckmann made an important contribution to this line of thinking back in 1967, during the cultural ferment of the time. Luckmann advocated an extraordinarily broad definition of religion, referring to religion as the “symbolic universes of meaning” that infuse all of life with a sense of transcendent purpose. He emphasized worldview as an elementary and universal manifestation of religion (Luckmann 1967).

In this respect, Luckmann’s definition of religion is similar to other functional definitions (Yinger 1970). However, rather than limiting religion to macro systems of meaning—meaning systems that address death, suffering, and injustice—he sought to understand worldview at all levels. He insisted that “no single interpretive scheme performs the religious function. It is rather the worldview as a whole, as a unitary matrix of meaning,” that defines one’s identity and serves as one’s religious orientation (Luckmann 1967:55–56). In essence, he pointed to personal identity as “a form of religiosity” (Luckmann 1967:70). People’s sense of identity—their values, attitudes, dispositions, and sense of self-worth—is part of their religiosity because all these are related to feelings about what makes life worth living. These are “invisible” forms of religion in that they do not have the social manifestations one normally associates with religion.

Luckmann believed that as society has become increasingly complex and as institutions have become specialized in their sphere of influence, traditional religions have influence over a decreasing range of human behavior and thinking. This combines with the tendency of traditional religions to fix their systems of belief so as to make them seem more eternal, absolute, and unchanging. At the same time, technological, political, and economic changes continue. Indeed, in the modern world, change occurs at ever-increasing rates. Luckmann maintained that this fluidity has caused traditional forms of religion to become irrelevant to the everyday experiences of many people. He denied that this represents a decline of religiosity. Common people are as religious as ever, but their religiosity has taken on new forms. Luckmann insisted that claims of a decline in religiosity are due to the fact that sociologists have usually asked questions that measure only traditional forms of religiosity such as formal affiliation with and worship at religious organizations or reading official scriptures. Our definitions of religion constrain what we look for and find.

In the modern world, people derive their sense of meaning by drawing on a wide range of religious and secular philosophies, each of which competes for the loyalties of individuals who act as consumers in the marketplace of ideas. The product that each philosophy is selling is a worldview—with its own system of values and its own definition of what makes life worth living. The world according to Oprah Winfrey (Lofton 2011), the pop psychology expressed in best-selling books like *The Four Agreements* (Ruiz 1997), and the ideals implicit in *The Simpsons* and *South Park* (Feltmate 2017) can all affect a person’s sense of the meaning of life and their individual “philosophy of life.”

Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

Even business enterprises, like Amway Corporation, seek to motivate by stressing the primacy of financial independence, the ultimate value of free-enterprise economics, and the rewards of close friendship with other distributors (Butterfield 1999; Palmisano and Pannofino

2013). In fact, the regular Amway weekend regional rallies can be analyzed as plausibility structures (see Chapter 2) that operate to reinforce the believability of the values and outlook presented by the corporation. In other words, Amway—like other nominally secular institutions—can take on the substance and functions of more traditional religious institutions. The parallels with what is called the gospel of prosperity or prosperity gospel in Christianity are striking (see Chapter 8).

Individualization of religion involves each person developing their own meaning system or philosophy of life by drawing from many sources, including secular media, traditional religions, contemporary spirituality, and popular psychology. While Luckmann did not see the process as indicative of a decline in religion, neither did he view it as a particularly healthy trend. When individuals construct their own meaning systems, those systems may seem less eternal and less compelling. The individual may, therefore, experience what sociologists call anomie—the condition of lacking social boundaries and direction in life. Further, those who do construct a sustainable meaning system often develop one that is so privatized that it offers meaning only to themselves as individuals. Because many privatized meaning systems in modern society exalt the autonomy of the individual (self-realization, individual mobility, etc.), the locus of meaning is in the individual biography (Luckmann 1967). Consequently, the communal benefits of religion could be lost. If individuals are less likely to make sacrifices for others, the privatization of religiosity could be unhealthy in the long run for the larger society.

Critical Thinking: Readers may find it interesting and worthwhile to reflect on their own sense of meaning and their own system of values. Do all your values evolve out of a traditional religion? Most of them? Some of them? What other sources have affected your outlook on life? Does it make sense to you to refer to personalized systems of meaning as a form of religiosity? Why or why not?

After garnering significant attention following his initial formulation, over the years fewer sociologists have drawn on Luckmann's concept of "invisible religion." The fundamental concern that motivated Luckmann, however, has not gone away. It lives on most clearly in the concept of "lived religion."

Lived Religion

Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of lived religion, sociologist Meredith McGuire centers her understanding on the distinction between "the actual experience of religious persons" and "the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices" (McGuire 2008:12). Lived religion, much like Luckmann's invisible religion, is *a part of* rather than *apart from* everyday life. The "Doing Research on Religion" box shows how one well-known sociologist, Nancy Ammerman (2021), has explored lived religion in the contemporary United States.

Doing Research on Religion

Finding Religion in Everyday Life

Following up on her 2014 work on lived religion, Nancy Ammerman's 2021 book *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* challenges some dominant theoretical approaches to understanding religion sociologically. These include perspectives that emphasize the destructive force of secularization leading to religion's ultimate demise (see Chapter 2). Ammerman's way forward centers on the study of lived religion. Like invisible religion, the idea of lived religion has been circulating for some time now—since the 1990s, in fact—but it bears repeating that sociologists need to look for religion “outside the (God) box” (as we say in Chapter 12) and can find it in everyday life.

Religion and spirituality manifest themselves not only in formal organizations (churches, temples, mosques, etc.), but also in informal gatherings and individual experiences. Lived religion is literally everywhere. Both in public spaces and in private settings, religion is happening! By highlighting how this requires the sensitizing concepts and methodological tools that go beyond what we traditionally use to identify and measure religion, Ammerman challenges us to be better sociologists of religion.

Instead of imposing categories and definitions of the religious world from the outside, researchers studying lived religion observe and measure them from the inside—in action. To analyze religion in ways that reflect a less rigid and more encompassing sociological perspective, Ammerman argues for applying more micro-level, ethnographic methods to complement the more widespread data gathering that takes place at the meso and macro levels of society. Note that the choice of levels of analysis is not mutually exclusive. At the same time she wants to emphasize the micro level, Ammerman suggests scholars who have done lived religion studies in the past have sometimes discounted the influences of more macro-level political and cultural forces. In paying more attention to the everyday activities of people, we can find the religious meanings and values people give their taken-for-granted routines across levels of analysis.

Ammerman identifies spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotions, aesthetics, morality, and narrative as interconnected lenses through which we may come to better understand lived religion. Beginning with what is perhaps the most distinct and the most difficult dimension to measure, researchers can approach spirituality qualitatively through interviews and participant observation, but also quantitatively through the research of psychologists and cognitive scientists. A focus on embodiment allows sociologists to bring together established approaches to studying organization-driven rituals, while simultaneously highlighting the individuality of the body's place in people's lived experience. Lived religion exists not only in the minds and bodies of believers, but also in places and material culture. Including materiality in the study of religion allows for broad, inclusive, and comparative study across traditions, practices, and peoples. Incorporating the emotional dimensions of lived religion can help researchers better understand what motivates people's actions, what binds people to institutions, or how community leaders communicate theologies. Ammerman then argues that the aesthetic dimension, building on the three previous, can help researchers better understand believers' diverse experiences of beauty as a central part of their religious lives. Moving on to what we might consider a more traditional dimension, examining morality from the perspective of lived religion offers researchers insight into how believers and their communities define and are motivated to action by conceptions of how the world

should be. Finally, in bringing all other dimensions together, Ammerman argues for a focus on narratives produced both by individuals and by communities as a way in which people make sense of their lives and those around them.

Ammerman's *Studying Lived Religion* offers a theoretically and methodologically inclusive and flexible approach that advances the sociology of religion. Moving beyond traditional academic definitions and boundaries, this multidimensional schema works across levels of analysis, is not bound by tradition-specific definitions, and at all times reminds us that religion and belief are ultimately social.



Front Gate of Theresa Collins's Home

Photo by Theresa Collins, used by permission of Nancy Tatom Ammerman

Without making any claim that Collins is typical, Ammerman shows in this single example, threaded throughout the book, how spiritual stories are shaped by religious communities (sacred tribes) but also spill over into the world of everyday life, sacralizing the mundane.

Source: Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 2014. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scholars have employed the concept of lived religion in a variety of different settings. For example, rather than simply examining Muslims at prayer or reading the Qur'an, some have examined how young Muslims in London's East End negotiate their identity in a hostile environment or how Somali migrant women understand Islam in relation to healing and illness (Dessing, Jeldtoft, and Woodhead 2013). Others have applied the concept to the cremation movement in late nineteenth-century America and the singing of hymns by the Ojibwe (a Native

American tribe) in northern Minnesota (Hall 1997). Still others have explored “transgressive” forms of lived religion in phenomena like the “ex-gay” movement, queer nuns and celibacy, monogamy and sexual promiscuity, and BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) (Talvacchia, Larrimore, and Pettinger 2014). That the concept of lived religion appears a number of times in this textbook suggests the usefulness of the idea.

Spiritual but Not Religious?

Another conceptual issue that raises definitional challenges for sociologists studying religion today is that some people consciously reject organized religion in favor of more individualized forms of “spiritual” belief and practice. It is increasingly common to hear people utter the phrase “I am spiritual, not religious.” Spirituality in this sense is seen as a quality of an individual whose inner life is oriented toward God, the supernatural, or the sacred. Spirituality is considered primary, purer, and more directly related to the soul in its relation to the divine, while religion is secondary, dogmatic, and stifling, often distorted by oppressive sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces. Some scholars have argued that in the new millennium, there is a “divorce” between spirituality and religion with more personal forms of spirituality destined to replace traditional, organized forms of religion (Cimino and Lattin 2002). However, the relationship between spirituality and religion is not quite as simple as that.

Robert Wuthnow argued that “at its core, spirituality consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (Wuthnow 1998:viii). There is nothing in this definition of spirituality that makes it inherently antithetical to religion. To the contrary, spirituality has historically been connected to religion. Even though it is a social phenomenon, individual forms of piety such as prayer, meditation, or other devotions (often with a mystical component) have long been part and parcel of many major religious traditions. Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism, and Benedictine, Franciscan, and Dominican spirituality in Roman Catholic Christianity are well-known examples. Given the historical connection between traditional religion and spirituality, it may be better to use the term *unchurched spirituality* to refer to religious beliefs and practices that exist outside of traditional religious institutions (Hamberg 2009).

A second important point to consider is that “unchurched” does not mean “not social.” Wuthnow pointed out that “spirituality is not just the creation of individuals; it is shaped by larger social circumstances and by the beliefs and values present in the wider culture” (Wuthnow 1998:viii). That is, we construct our spirituality out of the “toolbox” of cultural resources that is available to us at the time we are living.

Courtney Bender highlights this social dimension of spirituality in her study of contemporary spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Spirituality for these individuals is not a purely individual project but is learned and practiced in social organizations, just as religion is (Bender 2010). Some of these social organizations are religious, but Bender also finds spirituality produced in a variety of institutions that are typically considered secular, like medicine, art, and even the market economy. Examples include the Mystical Art and Talent Show

and the Whole Health Expo. Spirituality among the “new metaphysicals” Bender studied is also deeply rooted in practices like homeopathic healing, astrology, regression therapy, yoga, Reiki, shamanistic drumming, and spiritual belly dance.



Wildlight Wellness Collective

The Wildlight Wellness Collective in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is an example of a social space providing spiritual practices like Courtney Bender analyzes in her book *The New Metaphysicals*. The Collective describes itself as “a community of like-minded souls committed to personal transformation through holistic wellness practices. Sound baths, Reiki, yoga, plant medicine ceremonies, and sacred circles became ways for us to support one another on our individual paths. The integration of our masculine and feminine energies allowed us to create a space that felt alive—a space of authenticity and care, where all could be seen, held, and encouraged to grow” (www.wildlight.life).

Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

Because of this, Bender suggests that the phrase “spiritual not religious” obscures more than it enlightens. Although they do occupy a different space in the spiritual marketplace than those who dwell in congregational religion, Cambridge’s metaphysicals and mystics are inside rather than outside religion.

Reflecting the increased recognition of spiritual identities and practices, over the last several decades institutions of higher learning have developed study centers and both undergraduate and graduate degree programs that integrate spirituality into their programming. On one end of this spectrum, a traditional, four-year Catholic university—Loyola Marymount in Los

Angeles—has developed the Center for Religion and Spirituality, which offers certificates and professional programs for those in religious community leadership roles. Their programs work within the Catholic tradition, but integrate less dogmatic approaches to a religious life. Another example of this developing institutionalization of spirituality, Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, has a long-established Buddhist-inspired curriculum focused on the arts and therapy-training education. Of note, some programs and research centers have moved toward a focus on a “mindfulness”-based approach to their offerings.

Many of these programs work toward joining spirituality, mindfulness, or contemplative study with science, often in relation to health outcomes. For example, Western Michigan University offers a master of arts in spirituality, culture, and health, and the University of Virginia houses both a Contemplative Sciences Center and a Mindfulness Center within its medical school. In the end, although it is conceptually distinct, individual spirituality is never far removed from religion.

The Pew Research Center has been asking a representative sample of Americans questions about their relationship with both religion and spirituality. Rather than asking if people think of themselves as “spiritual not religious,” respondents were asked two separate questions: “Do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?” and “Do you think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?” When Pew first asked this question in 2012, the responses looked very much like what Roof (1999) found a decade earlier (see Table 1.1). Only 19 percent of the sample considered themselves spiritual but not religious, while 3 times as many (59 percent) considered themselves both spiritual and religious. Only 16 percent of respondents did not consider themselves either religious or spiritual. In just 5 years, responses shifted dramatically. The percentage of individuals identifying themselves as spiritual but not religious increased by over 40 percent, and the percentage identifying as religious and spiritual declined by nearly 20 percent. Although it is easy to imagine this to reflect generational change, there is no difference in the “spiritual but not religious” between those 18 to 29, 30 to 49, and 50 to 64 years of age. About 30 percent of each of these age groups say spiritual “yes” and religious “no,” compared to those older than 65, 17 percent of whom are spiritual but not religious (Lipka and Gecewicz 2017).

Table 1.1 ■ Religious, Spiritual, Both, or Neither?

	2012	2017
Religious and Spiritual	59%	48%
Spiritual but Not Religious	19%	27%
Neither Religious nor Spiritual	16%	18%
Religious but Not Spiritual	6%	6%

Source: Lipka, Michael, and Claire Gecewicz. 2017. “More Americans Now Say They’re Spiritual but Not Religious.” Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

In a more recent survey, Gallup found that 47 percent of Americans identify as religious and 33 percent identify as spiritual. While only 2 percent of the respondents voluntarily identified as “both,” 18 percent identified as neither religious nor spiritual, up from 11 percent in 2002 (Gallup International 2023; Jones 2023). These and other studies remind us that what scholars define as religion must reflect how people identify themselves in relation to religion. We have a responsibility to remain both evidence-based and open-minded when working toward any definition of religion.

The Concept of Religion as Employed in This Text

In attempting to present a comprehensive sociological perspective on religion, our approach is to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, rather than dichotomizing religion from nonreligion, sacred from profane, visible from invisible, official from lived, spiritual from religious, we seek to explore anything that provides meaning and purpose in the lives of people. We ask *how* people are religious rather than *whether* they are religious. Hence, the perspective of this book will be most compatible with the comprehensive symbolic definition of Geertz, although we also incorporate the research and insights of those who use a broader functional definition or a narrower substantive definition of religion.

To summarize, we maintain that religion is an interdependent system by which a community of people are bonded by:

- a shared meaning system (a faith or a worldview);
- a set of myths (beliefs), rituals, and symbol systems that sacralize the meaning system for the members;
- a sense of belonging to some group;
- a system of ethics or values that is directive in the lives of the members; and
- a set of routinized social expectations and patterns.

At the same time, we hope that these criteria for identifying religion are sufficiently broad so that we do not miss the religious significance of nontraditional groups and even less organized spiritual movements. We will be studying Methodists, Muslims, and Moonies, but this approach also allows us to explore belly dancing, skateboarding, and Scientology as religious practices that can impact traditional religion and that may well be emerging as new religions.

A Final Word about Definitions

One’s definition of religion is important, for it specifies what are and what are not appropriate objects of investigation for the sociologist of religion. The discussion in this chapter is designed to help the reader understand differences in the ways religion has been defined by scholars.

We hope this discussion has stimulated you to think through your own criteria for identifying religion. A consensus among us would be convenient, but a lack of agreement need not cause problems for the empirical study of religion (Lechner 2003). The purpose of this text is not to convert readers to the authors' theoretical persuasion but to help you think more clearly about the relationship between religion, culture, and society.

Before going further, it would be helpful to consider (1) your own assumptions regarding the definition of religion, (2) the defining criteria used by the social scientists discussed in this chapter, and (3) the perspective of the authors. As we noted at the outset of this chapter, and as Yinger has written,

Definitions are tools; they are to some degree arbitrary. . . . They are abstract, which is to say they are oversimplifications. . . . We must relinquish the idea that there is any one definition that is correct and satisfactory for all. (Yinger 1970:4)

The definition we each use tends to "slice up life" a little differently and causes us to focus on slightly different phenomena as most important. Hence, we have begun by making our assumptions about religion explicit. For an exercise that can help you take a more reflexive approach to your own assumptions, see the "Illustrating Sociological Concepts" box on designing your own religion.

Although there is no consensus on the definition of religion, there is agreement among sociologists that any investigation of religion must be based on empirical methods of investigation. In the next chapter, we explore what it means to take a social scientific approach to studying religion.

Illustrating Sociological Concepts

Design Your Own Religion

Our assumptions about what we mean by the term *religion* are hard for us to see. That, after all, is the nature of assumptions. By outlining various ways of defining religion, as well as highlighting conceptual distinctions between religion and spirituality, this chapter helps students get some critical distance on their assumptions about religion.

An assignment created by Boston University religion professors M. David Eckel and Stephen Prothero offers students an excellent vehicle for further examining their understanding of what religion is, and also what they like and dislike about religion as they understand it. Professors Eckel and Prothero ask students to *design their own new religion* and to present it to their classmates. The class then votes on the best new religion, and the designers of the winning religion earn A's for the presentation portion of the assignment.

If you were to design your own new religion, what would it look like? Professors Eckel and Prothero encourage their students to consider the following questions when undertaking this assignment:

- How does your religion incorporate different dimensions of religion (ritual, myth, experience and emotion, organization, morals/ethics, doctrine/philosophy, material culture)?
- What holidays does it celebrate?

- How does it deal with birth? Death?
- What are its key symbols? Beliefs? Practices?
- How, if at all, does it deal with the problem of evil?
- Does it have any interesting moral teachings? A political ethic? A sexual ethic?
- Does it have a story of creation or of the end of the world?
- What kinds of institutions or activities does it support?
- Finally, what is your religion really about?

Doing this assignment at the outset of your course—whether in writing, as a presentation to your classmates, or just as a mental exercise—will help you begin to make explicit and engage your assumptions about religion.

At the end of the course, you can also take some time to reflect back on the religion you designed and see what ideas from the course were most helpful in understanding why you designed the religion the way you did. You can also take on some broader questions: Having studied the sociology of religion, what would you change about the religion you designed? What does the particular religion you designed tell you about the current state and future prospects of religion in your society?

Source: Taylor, Kevin Matthew. 2016. "What American College Students Want from Religion: Facebookism, Lucid Dreaming, and Bodhisattva Tupac Shakur." *Implicit Religion* 19(2):237–65.

Summary and Looking Forward

Definitions of religion are usually one of two types: (1) substantive (which focus on the substance or essence of religion) and (2) functional (which focus on what religion does). Substantive definitions usually emphasize a specific belief, such as in spiritual beings or in a supernatural realm, or they stress the distinction between sacred and profane realms of experience. Substantive definitions tend to focus attention on the traditional forms of religiosity. Functional definitions identify religion as that which provides a sense of ultimate meaning in life. Social scientists who are interested in cultural change and new forms of meaning that are emergent tend to favor functional definitions. Because they are not overly focused on traditional forms of religiosity, they often view religion as changing rather than as declining.

This text is based on the definition of religion as an interdependent system by which a community of people are bonded (a) by a shared meaning system (a faith or a worldview); (b) by a set of myths (beliefs), rituals, and symbol systems that sacralize the meaning system for the members; (c) by a sense of belonging to a reference group; (d) by a system of ethics or values that is directive in the lives of the members; and (e) by a set of routinized social expectations and patterns.

Taking seriously our own idea that definitions are tools to be judged not as true or false but as more or less useful, in this chapter we considered other phenomena that share boundaries with religion (like invisible religion or lived spirituality) and in some cases challenged accepted understandings of what religion is and what it is not. Invisible religion, lived religion, and the relationship between spirituality and religion each remind us of the importance of making conceptual distinctions, but also of being open to new social developments that may challenge

our assumptions about what should or should not be considered under the heading *religion*. Looking forward, we need to be willing to adapt our understanding of religion—including the very definition of religion we use—in order to capture a complex and ever-changing social reality.

Concluding Questions: What do you mean by the term religion, and how does this chapter inform your previous understanding? Looking at the world around you today, is there anything you think of as religion or religion-ish that ought to be included in any comprehensive and useful definition?

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Chapter 2

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Historical Development of the Sociology of Religion

Chapter Outline

The Classical Era

The Secularization Paradigm

New Religious Developments

New Paradigms

Neosecularization Theory

Future Prospects

Summary and Looking Forward

Here are some questions to ponder as you read this chapter:

- How did the social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution give rise to the discipline of sociology?
- What were the main contributions of theorists of the classical era to the sociological study of religion?
- How do different theorists understand what “secularization” means, and what do their different understandings have in common?
- What are the central differences between the “old” secularization paradigm and the “new” paradigms that arose to challenge it?
- How is the focus of neosecularization theory on the declining scope of religious authority different from the original secularization paradigm and a response to the new paradigms that arose in response to it?
- What are the limitations of the sociology of religion to date, and how are sociologists attempting to move beyond these limitations?

It is difficult—perhaps impossible—for those of us living in the twenty-first century to fully understand the magnitude of change that the modern industrial social order thrust upon people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1990:xi) begins his book on the birth of the Industrial Revolution in a dramatic fashion by declaring, “The industrial revolution marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents.” We usually associate this revolution with economic changes. We think of developments such as the movement from agriculture and small-scale craft production to large-scale, steam-engine-driven manufacturing. These economic changes were, in fact, revolutionary in themselves. Rather than owning their own tools or having their own land to cultivate, factory workers became wage laborers. This meant they ate only if they made money, and they made money only if they worked for someone else. This made the lives of factory workers in the early Industrial Revolution very precarious. This already highlights how the social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution went beyond the economics of production.

Industrial production also took place in larger and larger factories, which meant greater and greater concentrations of people in the same places. Large cities (for the time) sprung up very quickly with the arrival of people uprooted from their rural homes seeking employment. A city of 50,000 people would be considered small to most of us today, but it was incomprehensibly large to most rural peasants living in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And the rates of growth were astonishing. A major early industrial city, Manchester in England, grew from 90,000 people in 1801 to 237,000 in 1831 to 400,000 in 1851. On top of the shock of simply adjusting to urban life, the expansion of the cities produced a seemingly endless list of social problems: overcrowding, pollution, noise, traffic, and disease.



Manchester from Kersal Moor (1852)

This photo of William Wyld's 1852 *Manchester from Kersal Moor* highlights the stark contrast between the rapidly urbanizing industrial city of Manchester, England, and the idyllic countryside outside the city. Manchester was known as “Cottonopolis” because of the central role it played in the cotton industry, a primary driver of the Industrial Revolution.

From the Royal Collection via Wikimedia Commons

Hobsbawm (1990:85) observes that the very rhythm of life in industrial society was profoundly different from before. Living in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, we all take for granted what Hobsbawm calls the “tyranny of the clock.” On farms, seconds and minutes and even hours are irrelevant units of time when it comes to planting and harvesting agricultural crops. But in a factory, just like your college classrooms, seconds and minutes count. If you are like our students and your class begins at 12:00, you want to arrive as close to 12:00 as possible, and if it ends at 1:15, you want to leave no later than 1:15. Because that is all you get “paid” for, you may sit and watch the clock for 75 minutes every class. But the flip side of that coin is that you are responsible for being in that same place and time for 75 minutes whether you want to be or not. The clock owns you in a way that it was completely irrelevant to those living an agrarian lifestyle.

A driving motivation of early social theorists was a recognition of this fundamental transformation of social relations. Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) highlights the distinction between traditional, community, and family-based relationships (*gemeinschaft*) and those more modern, impersonal relationships (*gesellschaft*) driven by the growth of rational, economy-informed social structures. This is why Hobsbawm concludes that the modern era brought with it “a new relationship between [people], . . . a new rhythm of life, a new society, a new historical era” (Hobsbawm 1990:43). Sociology emerged as a discipline because of a desire to understand and control these revolutionary social changes taking place in nineteenth-century Europe. In contemporary social theorist Charles Lemert’s words, “we may say that the first professional theorists were individuals who could not have done social theory without the new society” (Lemert 2016:4). Without the Industrial Revolution and the transformation of life it entailed, there would have been no felt need to theorize about society, and hence no development of sociology.

The changing place of religion in this new society was an important concern of these theorists in what we call the “classical era.” It is important to think some about this because contemporary sociologists often work within the intellectual frameworks established by the classics (Alexander 1987). The sociology of religion developed within the intellectual perspectives the classical theorists established, and the field continues to develop as scholars engage in dialogue with existing schools of thought, with each other, and with the evolving social world.

The Classical Era

Although the classical era of sociological theorizing (1848–1919) cannot be reduced to the work of three individuals (Lemert 2016), due to space constraints here we limit our discussion to the three widely acknowledged “founding fathers” of sociology: Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all believed that there was something fundamentally different about the emerging modern world in contrast to premodern society and developed conceptual frameworks that explained the differences between the two. This included the changing place of religion in the course of societal modernization.

Marx’s analysis centers on the transition from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production. Feudalism and capitalism are similar insofar as they are both societies in which one class exploits another. In both agrarian and industrialized societies, religion offers an amelioration from the

suffering generated by exploitative labor relations. In a famous phrase you may have heard, religion “is the opium of the people” (Marx [1844] 1977:131), pacifying the exploited classes and keeping them from rising up against their oppressors. Where modern society differs for Marx is in the extent of the social disruption associated with industrial capitalism and the potential for radical social change. His was a normative and rather optimistic view of a potential future in which workers gain the true, revolutionary consciousness necessary to recognize and act on their own interests to establish an exploitation-free society. We must highlight that for Marx, this meant an end to religion. In his view, radical social change (his ultimate goal) is only possible through analytical criticism—and that must begin with the criticism of religion (Marx [1844] 1977). Thus, this ideal society will be religion-free, because the subjective illusion of religion disappears with the objective and critical understanding of the conditions of workers’ oppression. To be clear here, one of the most transformative social theorists of the modern era advocated for the end of religion—a perspective that continues to shape how we understand and study religion today.

In contrast to Marx’s concern that religion was an impediment to social evolution, Durkheim recognized the near-universal place religion occupied globally. While he believed more traditional forms of religion would ultimately succumb to modern rationality and science, his focus was on how religion’s various functions have and will change over time (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Durkheim was centrally concerned with the shifting sources of solidarity in modern society. In premodern societies, solidarity is based on a commonality of beliefs and sentiments among members of society. In ritual celebrations, communities experience a “collective effervescence” that enlivens the collective consciousness. As societies grow larger and more diverse, the collective consciousness wanes, and individualism rises. In the transition, “the former gods are growing old or dying” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:429). But Durkheim understood the socially crucial functions religion plays. Because “religion is, in a sense, indispensable,” he observes, it is destined to be reborn in modern society. Recognizing that “the religion of yesterday could not be the religion of tomorrow” (Durkheim [1898] 1973:51), he looked for the specific ways in which religion is transformed. Religion survives in two related forms: first, as “moral individualism, the cult of the individual,” which recognizes the sacredness of the human person (Durkheim [1906] 1953:59), and second, as civil religious ideals (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Both of these modern forms of religion are enlivened by national ritual celebrations, as we will see in later chapters. For Durkheim then, while traditional forms of religion might give way in a modern society, their generative solidarity will necessarily be taken up by newer forms of social organization.

Weber’s perspective on modern society is much less unidimensional than Marx’s or Durkheim’s, but does center on the process of rationalization. Rationalization entails a growing divide between religion and other spheres of society, at both the intellectual and the institutional level (Gorski and Ates 2008). Intellectually, rationalization leads to a “disenchantment of the world” wherein people increasingly look to reason rather than “mysterious incalculable forces” to understand the world (Weber [1917] 1946:155, 139). Institutionally, politics, economics, art, and other “value-spheres” increasingly operate according to their own logics (“rationalities”), distinct from religion. This is exemplified by Weber’s famous and ominous characterization of modern capitalist impulses as an “iron cage” of rationality (Weber [1905] 1958a:181). Although a religiously inspired ethic helped give rise to rational capitalism, once it is established the economic system operates on its own and according to its own logic, without any need for that

religious ethic. It is important to note, however, that Weber is arguing that religion becomes a separate sphere in modern society, not that it disappears entirely.

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber set the intellectual boundaries within which later sociological work flowed. Taken together, these classical theorists established the dominant perspective for sociology's understanding of religion: Modernity is a secularizing force. At the same time, the transformations of religion they predicted represent different understandings of what secularization means. Like Marx, those working in the Marxist tradition equated modernization with the (eventual) disappearance of religion. By contrast, those following Weber and Durkheim theorized various transformations of religion but not its complete decline or disappearance in modern society. Those predicting the transformation, not disappearance, of religion became the dominant group of scholars studying religion in the third quarter of the twentieth century. They established what had been called the "secularization paradigm" (Tschannen 1991).

Generally, a paradigm can be understood as a school of scholarship in which members are in fundamental agreement about key theoretical presuppositions, concepts, empirical procedures, and exemplary studies. The concept of scientific paradigms was developed by philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970) in his landmark book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In fact, the level of consensus that Kuhn finds in scientific fields such as physics does not exist in the sociology of religion, much less in sociology generally. In Kuhn's terms, sociology is actually a "pre-paradigmatic" field. As this chapter and this textbook demonstrate, the sociology of religion is composed of competing schools of scholarship that disagree about key theoretical presuppositions, conceptual definitions, what constitutes significant data, and even the very definition of their object of inquiry, "religion" (as we saw in Chapter 1). This fact notwithstanding, we use the term *paradigm* here to describe key approaches to the study of religion as the term has been employed by many sociologists of religion to describe their work.

The Secularization Paradigm

The dominant paradigm for studying religion in sociology has its roots in the classical era of the discipline, in the ideas of its founding fathers, and centers on the concept of secularization. The term *secularization* was initially used, according to Daniel Bell (1980:331–332),

to denote the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities. In this sense, secularization means the disengagement of religion from political life—the classic instance is the separation of Church and State—and the sundering of religion from aesthetics so that art need no longer bend to moral norms, but can follow its own impulses, wherever they lead. In short, it is the shrinkage of institutional authority over the spheres of public life, the retreat to a private world where religions have authority only over their followers, and not over any other section of the polity or society.

Secularization theorists in the field of sociology retained this understanding in thinking about the changing place of religion in modern society. No individual theorist embodies the entire paradigm, and there are important differences between them, but Peter Berger and Robert Bellah offer two significant approaches within the paradigm.

Peter Berger (1967) begins by arguing that unlike many animals, humans are “unfinished” at birth due to our underspecialized and undirected instinctual structure. Consequently, we must make a “world” for ourselves that renders our environment stable and predictable. Berger uses the term *nomos* to denote this cultural world, including both a worldview (the intellectual framework and knowledge that explains the world) and an ethos (its moral attitude toward living in the world). Over time, this *nomos* that we as human beings created in the first place becomes seen as something that exists independently of us. Sociologists refer to this as “reification”—the collective forgetting of society’s historical role in establishing norms:

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things . . . [it] is the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world. . . . The reified world . . . confronts man as something outside of himself. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:82–83)

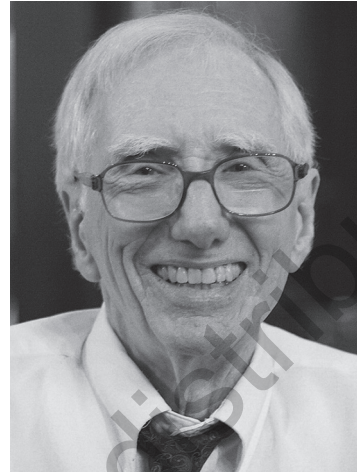
Society then socializes individuals into this *nomos*, helping to create a stable social order.

Berger argues that this process of “world construction” is fundamentally religious because the *nomos* cannot be seen as optional or arbitrary. Religion legitimizes the *nomos* by clothing it in an aura of sacredness and absoluteness, establishing that it is eternal, not arbitrary. The *nomos* may be thought to reflect some sacred cosmos or the will of a god or gods. Regardless of how it is ultimately grounded, the stability and predictability that humans need in their environment are provided by this “sacred canopy” covering society. The sacred canopy is supported by what Berger calls “plausibility structures”—organizations, rituals, symbols, music, architecture, and more—that reinforce the taken-for-grantedness of the *nomos*.

Over time, Berger observes, the sacred canopy is less able to create a common world of meaning that binds all members of a society. The pluralism of worldviews in modern societies plays a key role in this for Berger. When individuals in society are confronted with worldviews other than their own, their own worldview will seem less absolute. Pluralization of plausibility structures—for example, the growth in the number of different sects of Christianity following the Protestant Reformation—weakens the sacred canopy as well. This, for Berger, is secularization. Like Bell, Berger (1967:107) defines secularization as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”

Secularization has important consequences for religious belief. Individuals become aware of the plurality of possible religious views—each potentially legitimate—from which they must choose. The fact that one consciously selects a religious orientation (rather than being compelled by the conviction that there is only one possible view) makes the choice less than certain. Berger did not view this situation as one in which the individual is *free* to choose—an option now available to individuals. Rather, each person *must* choose; that is, one is compelled to do so. Berger called this the “heretical imperative,” because the Greek root of heresy (*herein*) means “to choose.” The net effect, he believed, is a diminishing of the power of religion in the lives of people (Berger 1979). To use Clifford Geertz’s phrase, it is the difference “between holding a belief and being held by one” (Geertz 1968:17).

Berger also saw consequences of secularization for religious organizations. He concluded that a modern religious organization has two options. First, it can accommodate, “play the game of religious free enterprise,” and “modify its product in accordance with consumer demand”—a phenomenon we address in later sections of this book. Second, it can entrench itself and maintain its worldview behind whatever socioreligious plausibility structures it can construct (Berger 1967:153). A religious organization that takes the first course tends to become secularized from within and lose its sense of transcendence or sacredness. It focuses on “marketing” the faith to a clientele that is no longer required to “buy.” In the process, the faith may be severely compromised. A group that takes the second course, by contrast, may uphold the sanctity of their worldview, but at the cost of being an “irrelevant” minority faith that exists separate from society. This culminated in Berger’s pronouncement to the *New York Times* that by the twenty-first century, “religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture” (*New York Times* and Berger 1968).



Robert N. Bellah

One of the most distinguished sociologists of the post-World War II era, Robert N. Bellah began theorizing the role of religion in societal modernization in the 1950s. Part of his unfinished magnum opus was published posthumously in 2017 as *Religion in Human Evolution*.

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A contemporary of Peter Berger’s and the second major secularization theorist we will consider is Robert Bellah. As a secularization theorist, Bellah agreed with Berger that religious institutions exert less direct influence on secular institutions than in the past. But his explanation of the process of secularization differs somewhat from Berger’s. Bellah focuses on what he calls “religious evolution.” Religious evolution is the process by which religious symbols become more complex over time in response to the greater complexity of social organization.

Bellah specified five stages of religious evolution: (1) primitive (e.g., Australian Aborigines), (2) archaic (e.g., Native American), (3) historic (e.g., Ancient Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Early Palestinian Christianity), (4) early modern (e.g., Protestant Christianity), and (5) modern (religious individualism). He argued that beginning with the single cosmos of the primitive religious worldview in which life is a “one possibility thing” (Bellah 1970c:29), evolution in the religious sphere is toward the increasing differentiation and complexity of symbol systems. In the modern stage of religious evolution, the symbol system is “infinitely multiplex” (Bellah 1970c:40).

In the midst of this transformation, new forms of religiosity are emerging. These new forms are less dualistic (with the material world, which is evil, opposing spiritual existence, which is good) and involve more this-worldly spiritualities, which offer a more individualized symbol system that “relates people to the ultimate condition of their existence” (recall Bellah’s definition of religion in Chapter 1). The attempt discussed in Chapter 1 to discover “invisible religions” or “lived religion” is in keeping with this emphasis on new, more individualized forms of religion.

Furthermore, individuals have more autonomy in being able to think for themselves and to create their own personalized system of meaning. In this post-traditional situation, the individual confronts life not as a “one possibility thing” but as an “infinite possibility thing” (Bellah 1970c:40). Each person is “capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and . . . of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms . . . that [shape] his own existence” (Bellah 1970c:42). Bellah and his colleagues would later give a prime example of this concept in their best-selling book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. A young nurse they interviewed, Sheila Larson (a pseudonym), told them the following:

I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.
(Bellah et al. 1985:221)

Noting that Sheilaism raises the possibility of as many religions in the United States as there are people—an “infinite possibility thing,” indeed—the authors conclude that “‘Sheilaism’ somehow seems a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life” (Bellah et al. 1985:221).

Much more could be said about the complexity of the secularization paradigm (Goldstein 2009; Tschannen 1991), but highlighting the separation or differentiation of other institutions from religion and the rise of personal autonomy for individuals relative to religion suggests a sort of bottom-line understanding of secularization as a theory of religious change in modern society. The primary direction of this change is toward “the diminution in the social significance of . . . religious institutions, actions, and consciousness” (Wilson 1982:149). This is not to say, as Marx had hoped, the disappearance of religion entirely. Both Berger and Bellah develop Weber’s idea of different value-spheres emerging in society, each with its own rationality (Gorski and Guhin 2017). In a differentiated society, the norms, values, and practices of the religious sphere have only an indirect influence on other spheres such as business, politics, leisure, and education (Wilson 1982). Similarly, Berger and Bellah both recognize the importance of the rise of personal autonomy in modern society, following Durkheim. Personal autonomy in religion is not the same as irreligion. As Bellah concludes, “The analysis of modern [humanity] as secular, materialistic, dehumanized, and in the deepest sense areligious seems to me fundamentally misguided” (Bellah 1970c:40).

Critical Thinking: Provide evidence from your own life or the broader social world that supports Berger’s idea of “the heretical imperative” and Bellah’s “infinite possibility thing.” What about evidence *against* both?

New Religious Developments

At the same time secularization theory was being established as the dominant postclassical era paradigm in sociology, religion surged back into public and scholarly consciousness in ways that secularization theorists had not anticipated. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars noticed an increase in the prominence of nonconventional religious groups known as “new religious movements”

(NRMs) (see Chapter 6). Among the earliest studied were Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church (the "Moonies"), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, aka "Hare Krishnas"), the Divine Light Mission, the Children of God, Jesus People, UFO cults, Scientology, and Soka Gakkai. Some speculated that these NRMs were part of a much broader cultural shift that included more diffuse quasi-religious phenomena like the human potential movement, astrology, and mysticism. In the 1970s, it appeared that an entire "New Age" movement was emerging as an alternative both to secular modernity and to the established churches of Christianity. In contrast to the expectations of secularization theory, these developments were characterized as a great awakening or consciousness reformation (Wuthnow 1976).

In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars were also confronted by the dramatic appearance of religion in the public sphere. The decisive moment was the 1979 revolution in Iran that established an Islamic republic under religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini. The murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero while saying mass in 1980 drew attention to Liberation Theology as a movement within the Catholic Church in Latin America. The Solidarity movement, founded in 1980 in Poland, received support and encouragement from the Catholic Church, especially Pope John Paul II (a former Archbishop of Kraków). The mobilization of conservative Christians in the United States by the Moral Majority, which was credited with helping Ronald Reagan win the presidency in 1980, enlivened interest in the politics of the "New Christian Right." All this forced the rediscovery of a connection between politics and religion globally rather than the differentiation of religion from politics predicted by secularization theory.

Along with these cultural and political developments, sociologists of religion paid increasing attention to ever more available demographic data that did not seem to fit the dominant narrative of secularization. The religious movements least accommodated to secular modernity appeared to be the very ones that were growing the fastest. An explosion of Pentecostalism was observed not only in Latin America, Africa, and Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, but also in the United States. Simultaneously, the more liberal churches of the American Protestant establishment were declining in membership while the more conservative churches of evangelical Protestantism surged. Access to more and better-quality survey data also conveyed a strong sense that religion was alive and well, and confounded secularization theory's expectations about what types of religion would be attractive to people in modern society.

Critical Thinking: As you look at society today, both near to you and in distant parts of the globe, do you see signs of religious vitality? In what ways does this vitality challenge secularization theory?

The seeming reemergence of religion in global political and social events challenged the secularization paradigm, but no alternative paradigm existed to organize this flourishing diversity of studies. Near the end of the 1980s, Robert Wuthnow observed that the sociology of religion "has grown more rapidly in inductive empirical research and in subspecializations than it has in attempts to identify theoretically integrative concepts" (Wuthnow 1988:500). Not long after Wuthnow's lament, however, several competing frameworks emerged to replace what was increasingly called the "old paradigm" of secularization.

New Paradigms

The reality of secularization was taken for granted for so long that into the 1980s it was “part of the conventional sociological wisdom” (Lechner 1991b:1103). By the end of the 1990s, the idea that secularization was *not* inevitable became a contending position in the sociology of religion—a “new paradigm,” as Warner (1993) called it (at least in the United States). One critic of the secularization paradigm went so far as to claim that secularization theory was dead (Stark 2000b). Although we argue in this chapter that reports of the death of secularization theory were greatly exaggerated, we definitely observe the rise of new paradigms for the sociological study of religion over the past three decades.

In 1993, R. Stephen Warner announced that a new paradigm was emerging in the sociology of religion. Unlike the old secularization paradigm, whose assumptions were inherited from the classical theorists’ focus on the European experience, this new paradigm centered on the seemingly very different religious history of the United States. The open market, facilitated by the disestablishment of religion at the nation’s founding, created a paradigmatic situation of competition, rather than the religious monopoly that stifled religion in Europe. As a result, the master function of religion in the United States is to create social space for cultural pluralism (Warner 1993), like that seen in the NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s.

Warner (1993) also made three corollary observations. First, religious organizational forms in the United States are malleable and decentralized. This encourages innovations we discuss throughout this textbook such as storefront startups, seeker churches, and megachurches, as well as special-purpose religious groups, such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Promise Keepers, and Habitat for Humanity. Second, religion is not privatized and individualized but instead remains a source of individual and group empowerment. Religious organizations provide both material and ideological resources for political mobilization, as seen in the civil rights movement, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, the New Christian Right, Sojourners, and many others. Third, religion in America exemplifies an energetic “new voluntarism” characterized by religious mobility (conversion, switching, leaving religion), creative syncretism, religious seeking, and flowering spirituality. Under Warner’s new paradigm, the religious ferment of the preceding decades is viewed as normal rather than exceptional.

Another theoretical perspective codified in the late 1980s and early 1990s in opposition to the secularization paradigm was the religious economies model (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Although they are sometimes considered part of Warner’s new paradigm, the rational choice assumptions built into the religious economies model are quite different from Warner’s. Rational choice theory (RCT) applies economic principles of behavior to all areas of social life. RCT begins with the assumption that “humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and try to avoid what they perceive to be costs” (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:5). This is known in economics as “utility maximization.” Religious behavior is driven by this utility-maximizing calculus in the same way that any consumer behavior is (Iannaccone 1995). The benefits, of course, are nonmaterial when it comes to religious choices—a sense of meaning, assurance of an afterlife, feeling of communion with God, and so forth. This approach views religiously engaged people as consumers of “products” that provide these benefits and religious organizations (churches,

sects, denominations, NRMs) as “firms” competing with each other in the religious marketplace to supply those products (Finke and Stark 2005; Stark and Bainbridge 1996).

One of the key insights of this paradigm is the idea that, like commercial economies, religious economies thrive when they are allowed to operate without government interference. Finke (1990) summarizes the logic of the model: deregulation of religious economies → pluralism → competition → specialization of products (catering to a market niche) and aggressive recruitment → higher demand → greater participation. Thus, as a “natural” consequence of the invisible hand of the market operating unencumbered by state regulation, “over time the diversity of the religious market will reflect the very diversity of the population itself” (Finke 1990:622).



Touro Synagogue

The oldest Jewish synagogue in the United States is in Newport, Rhode Island, where separation of church and state and tolerance of other religious traditions was a founding principle. After George Washington was elected president of the new nation, he received a letter from this synagogue asking about his policies of pluralism. In 1790, Touro Synagogue received a handwritten letter signed by President Washington (prominently displayed in the synagogue to this day) embracing an open and “liberal” policy to all American citizens, regardless of origins or religious affiliation. In this letter, George Washington affirmed a policy of religious pluralism early in the country’s existence as a nation.

Photo by Keith Roberts

In the breakthrough article for the economics of religion, Finke and Stark tested perhaps the central hypothesis derived from the religious economies model, namely that “religious pluralism” contributes to higher levels of religious participation (what they call “religious mobilization”). Using quantitative data from the 1906 Census of Religious Bodies, Finke and Stark (1988) studied the impact of “adherence” (their indicator of mobilization) on “pluralism” and found a positive relationship. While Finke and Stark (1988) provided empirical support for the religious economies perspective, the data on which the support is built do not give any evidence for a trend over time. Thus, the empirical jewel in the religious economies crown is the award-winning book *The Churching of America*. Among other things, in this book Finke and Stark (2005) argue that

between 1776 and 2000, religious “adherence” in the United States grew from 17 to 62 percent and that this linear, upward slope is exactly the opposite of what is predicted by secularization theory.

Thus, contrary to Peter Berger’s thesis, rational choice theorists argue that pluralism actually makes the religious market competitive and therefore invigorates religious participation. They do not believe it undermines plausibility or commitment. Recent research, however, has questioned the positive connection between pluralism and participation in the religious economies model (Norris and Inglehart 2011). This controversy is discussed in the “Doing Research on Religion” feature.

Critical Thinking: Some scholars maintain that ascription (being born into a religion) makes for stronger religious commitment; others argue that achievement (choosing one’s faith in a competitive marketplace) makes one’s faith stronger. With which position do you agree? Why?

Doing Research on Religion

The Controversy over Secularization and Pluralism

One of the most contested claims of the original secularization thesis is that pluralism undermines religious commitment by making the faith position seem relative and less than certain—as Berger argued—and so pluralism leads to higher levels of religious mobilization—as rational choice theorists assert. The latter argue that religious pluralism creates more options for people so that they can choose from an array of religious products. Further, pluralism generates more vitality and energy among “religious entrepreneurs” as each tries to recruit members. The competition makes the entrepreneurs hungry and aggressive, thereby leading to new niches in the market. Pluralism prevents religious leaders from becoming complacent, which happens where competition is missing. Pluralism, therefore, creates religious vigor according to rational choice theorists.

In 1988, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark published a major article in support of the idea that pluralism and participation are positively related. They examined data from the 1906 U.S. Census of Religious Bodies on the 150 largest cities in the United States to test the following hypothesis: “The more pluralism, the greater the religious mobilization of the population—the more people there who will be committed to a faith” (Finke and Stark 1988:43). Their independent variable, pluralism, was measured using a religious diversity index that accounts for the number and size of different denominations. Using multiple regression analysis, Finke and Stark found a strong, positive relationship between religious diversity and religious participation leading them to criticize the secularization thesis.

Sociologist Kevin Breault responded to Finke and Stark’s work using more recent data—1980 data on churches and church membership from the Glenmary Research Center—in which he found the exact opposite: “a highly significant, consistently negative relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation” (Breault 1989a:1049). In a comment on Breault’s article, Finke and Stark rejected Breault’s findings. They noted that they asked a colleague—fellow rational choice theorist Laurence

Iannaccone—to replicate Breault’s statistical models using the same Glenmary data and that Iannaccone found a highly significant *positive* relationship between pluralism and participation (correlation of 0.21) (Finke and Stark 1989). For his part, Breault replied with a defense of his methodology and conclusions. He, too, recalculated the pluralism index and religious adherence rates and again found a relationship of almost exactly the same magnitude as Iannaccone’s, only *negative* (correlation of -0.22). The exchange ended at an impasse (Breault 1989b).

Almost a decade later, something very interesting happened. Another sociologist interested in the debate over pluralism and participation, Daniel Olson, tried to replicate the findings and found his results exactly in line with Breault’s: a negative relationship (correlation of -0.22) between pluralism and participation (Olson 1998). How could Finke/Stark/Iannaccone and Breault/Olson come to the opposite conclusions using the same data and methods?

Olson explained that when he inspected the statistical analysis software program files that Iannaccone used—which were provided to Olson by Iannaccone in the spirit of scientific objectivity and empiricism that we discuss in Chapter 3—he discovered a simple mathematical error in the programming language. The relationship between pluralism and participation in the 1980 Glenmary data was in fact negative. Working toward a better understanding of this debate, Mark Chaves and Philip Gorski completed a secondary analysis of 193 empirical tests of the relationship. After a careful critique of the methods of research in each study, they concluded that the large majority of studies indicate that pluralism in itself does *not* increase religious vigor or commitment in most social settings (Chaves and Gorski 2001).

In 2020, Olson and his colleagues, using 30 years of U.S. county-level church membership data, reaffirmed their original findings: Increased pluralism does *not* positively impact church vitality. Rather, data indicate a potentially long-term negative impact on church membership and participation. They are clear in their work that such findings are data-specific, and make no claims about generalizability outside the U.S. church context.

Competition due to a plurality of religious groups does seem to increase *some kinds* of religious commitment in *some* situations. More research is needed to understand the circumstances that create growth and those that do not. Still, this review of an extensive body of empirical literature does indicate that no dependable *general law* can be supported that identifies pluralism as a uniform cause of religious vitality or decline.

This particular story is an important reminder that sociology—even the sociology of religion—requires a scientific approach. That can mean challenging established ideas, applying new and more appropriate methods, and leveraging better data when available. The field must always work to improve itself.

A third emerging paradigm is what Smilde and May (2010) have called the “strong program” in the sociology of religion. Unlike Warner’s new paradigm and the religious economies paradigm, the strong program has not been pursued self-consciously. Rather, it emerged as a distinctive style of empirical research conducted by many scholars in the 1980s and 1990s and remains a prominent approach today. By strong program, Smilde and May mean an approach that treats religion not as a dependent variable (something to be explained) but as an independent variable (something that has explanatory power itself). In 2012, sociologist of religion Christian Smith beseeched his fellow sociologists: “It is time to take religion just as seriously as everything else humanly social,

and time to make the effort to learn complicated facts” (Smith 2012). Since the early 1980s, published articles on religion in sociology journals that analyze religious processes as a primary causal variable have outnumbered those that see social processes as primary (Smilde and May 2015).

Smilde and May (2015) also show an increasing tendency for the outcomes predicted by religion to be positive or prosocial. The strong program can be seen very clearly in studies that have repeatedly found positive effects of religious involvement on many health outcomes, especially for disadvantaged social groups. Sociologists have found that religion promotes healthier lifestyles, such as abstinence from or moderation in consumption of alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors. Religion also connects people in a deep and meaningful way, facilitating friendships and other networks of social support, both material and emotional. It provides mechanisms (both beliefs and practices) for coping with the stressors that reduce physical and mental well-being. It enhances feelings of self-esteem and efficacy, and encourages healthy emotions like forgiveness and hope. The central, causal role of religion in the strong program challenges the old secularization paradigm idea that religion is inherently a negative force and will lose its social significance in modern society.

Neosecularization Theory

In the face of these challenges, some scholars in the 1990s attempted to breathe new life into the “old paradigm” of secularization theory. This “neosecularization” perspective refocuses the theory around its core concepts while jettisoning peripheral concerns and unsustainable claims (Yamane 1997). (*Neo-* is a prefix meaning “new,” from the Greek word for young.) Connecting back to the original meaning of the term and core principles of the secularization paradigm, Chaves (1994:750) argues that secularization “is best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority” at the societal (macro), organizational (meso), and individual (micro) levels of analysis.

Similarly, Casanova (1994) reasserts the Weberian primacy of differentiation of secular spheres from religious norms as the core of secularization and rejects the Marxist idea that religion is destined to disappear in the course of societal modernization. He extends the theory by observing that the privatization of religion—the removal of religion from public life—is a historical option that plays out differently in different contexts. In some countries, such as France and Canada, religion is highly privatized. In other countries, such as Poland and the United States, it plays a very public role.

Although secularization theory views religion on three levels of analysis (Dobbelaere 1981), the most important is the macro level (Tschannen 1991). Therefore, the neosecularization paradigm emphasizes the centrality of institutional differentiation at the societal level. Institutional differentiation refers to the process by which “specialized institutions develop or arise to handle specific features or functions previously embodied in, or carried out by, one institution” (Wallis and Bruce 1991:4). As a consequence, in a highly differentiated society, the norms, values, and practices of the religious sphere have only an indirect influence on other spheres such as business, politics, leisure, and education (Wilson 1976). It is for this reason that we can point to differentiation as leading to a decline in the scope of religious authority: Specifically religious institutions have only a limited (or no) control over other institutional spheres.

This can be seen in the decline of “blue laws” in the United States. Blue laws are also called “Sunday statutes” or “Sunday closing laws,” because they typically prescribe certain activities

(especially the sale of alcohol) or require certain businesses to be closed (notably car dealerships) on Sundays. In their origins these prohibitions are government-enforced religious codes and so may be better called “Sabbath laws.” The term *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word meaning rest (*shabbat*), and notably appears as the third of Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God created the heavens, earth, and humankind in six days, and “on the seventh day he rested” (Genesis 2:2). In Judaism, the Sabbath is observed from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. The dominance of Christianity in Europe when these laws took on their current form dictated that they would apply to Sunday, the traditional Christian day of worship. In colonial America, the Sunday statutes were supposed to have been written on blue paper, giving rise to the term *blue laws* (Laband and Heinbuch 1987).

Over time, many blue laws in the United States have been repealed, some only recently. For example, the law banning hunting on Sunday in Virginia was repealed in 2014, and the sale of alcohol on Sundays in Minnesota was approved in 2017. In most places today, commercial and recreational activity is governed by economic, not religious, norms. As we explore further in Chapter 12, sporting events that were once prohibited now dominate Sundays in many communities.

Sunday statutes still exist in several places. Illinois bans horse racing, Minnesota bans car sales, Maine bans hunting, and Arkansas bans most alcohol sales. The continued existence of these laws highlights that the process of societal-level secularization is not uniform or inevitable. It is often the consequence of struggles between groups over how much religious versus secular authority should control the functioning of other social institutions (Smith 2003). Today, any private business can *voluntarily choose* to be closed on Sunday, for religious or secular reasons, as those who shop at Hobby Lobby or eat at Chick-fil-A know. But most do not, as neosecularization theory would predict.



Hobby Lobby Store Hours Sign

Along with Chick-fil-A, Hobby Lobby is the best-known national retail chain that is closed on Sunday. The store hours sign pictured here makes clear why. The company's motivation is further elaborated in its statement of purpose: “Honoring the Lord in all we do by operating the company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles” (www.hobbylobby.com/about-us/our-story).

Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

On the other hand, Christianity remains so woven into the fabric of social life in the United States that many Christians do not even recognize it, though non-Christians and those with no religion often do, as the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” box highlights.

Illustrating Sociological Concepts

You Might Be Done with Religion, but Religion Is Not Done with You

There is ample evidence that religion has not gone anywhere—we are surrounded by it to the point that we often do not even recognize its influence in our lives. In their podcast *Keeping It 101: A Killjoy's Introduction to Religion*, religious studies scholars Megan Goodwin and Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst (2020d) remind us, “You might be done with religion, but religion is not done with you.” Offering many examples throughout the series, they demonstrate how our calendars reflect religion and its everyday influence on our lives. This is true regardless of whether it is your religion or not, or whether you even claim any religion at all.

In a regular section of the podcast they call “Primary Sources” (wherein the hosts offer examples from their own lives), Morgenstein Fuerst recounted how, as practicing a Jew, she navigates what we might call “Christo-secularism” both as a parent and as a professional. At the time of the recording, her children attended day care and public school, and she continues to work at a public university. All three organizations operate using what we might consider a “normal” calendar, wherein Christmas and the New Year are holidays when people take time off from work and school. But Jewish holidays are not officially observed, and individuals must make special requests to miss school or work for observance of the High Holy Days. But unlike the Christmas break, Morgenstein Fuerst says:

[I]t means that I don't have the luxury of doing the holidays in a way that my Christian counterparts get to. . . . If Yom Kippur is on a Wednesday and I teach Tuesday, Thursday I come home, I have things already ready. We do it. . . . And then Thursday I go back as if that wasn't my highest holiday of the year. It doesn't prevent anyone from sending me emails that day. It doesn't prevent anyone from thinking that I should have the same 24-hour turnaround. But . . . as a Jewish person, I don't send people emails on Christmas. (Goodwin and Morgenstein Fuerst 2020c)

The social construct of time—something to which we are all beholden—is deferential to some and excludes others.

In other words, the “normal” calendar is, in fact, not normal for all people. Members of religious minorities and those of no religion regularly have their everyday lives shaped by someone else's religion. So, religion not only persists in particular times and places, but continues to be a constituent part of all our lives, whether we want it to be or not.

Critical Thinking: What do “holy days” and “holidays” mean for you? Are they separate? Related? Do you celebrate them? Why or why not? How does your religious preference influence your answer?

Secularization at the meso level occurs when secular transformations take place within religious organizations. For this reason, Chaves (1993) also called this “internal secularization.” At this level of analysis, we see religious authority playing a diminished role in controlling the resources of religious organizations (including their core values and practical priorities), particularly the agency arms of religious organizations (e.g., religious boards, associations, lobbying arms, fundraising units, schools, hospitals).

The secularization of higher education provides a good example of meso-level secularization. Most private universities in the United States began as religiously sponsored institutions. Prominent examples include Ivy League schools such as Harvard (Calvinist), Yale (Congregationalist), Princeton (Presbyterian), Brown (Baptist), and Dartmouth (Congregationalist), as well as other well-known universities such as Chicago (Baptist), Duke (Methodist), Vanderbilt (Methodist), and Wake Forest (Baptist). All these institutions are now secularized in terms of their organizational structure and curriculum (Marsden 1994).



Wait Chapel on the Campus of Wake Forest University

Until the late 1960s, students at Wake Forest University had to attend weekly religious services at Wait Chapel on campus. Two decades after ending mandatory chapel for students, the university became formally independent of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, thereby completing the process of organizational secularization.

Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

In the United States today, many church-related colleges are attempting to take their foundational religious ideals more seriously (Schmalzbauer and Mahoney 2018). Some

religiously related colleges, especially within fundamentalist or evangelical traditions, even make personnel decisions and curriculum decisions based on theological principles rather than standard bureaucratic procedures. In so doing, they continue to assert religious authority in organizational deliberations. This would indicate resistance to meso-level secularization. However, in a society that has experienced considerable institutional differentiation of religion from education, the resistance to internal secularization can come with a cost: diminished academic reputation (Burtchaell 1998; Daines, Randall, and Richards 2021). Of nationally prominent universities in the United States, few maintain a strong religious identity. Exceptions include Baylor (Baptist), Notre Dame (Catholic), Boston College (Jesuit/Catholic), Georgetown (Jesuit/Catholic), Gonzaga (Jesuit/Catholic), Brigham Young (Latter-day Saints), Villanova (Augustine/Catholic), and Pepperdine (Churches of Christ). But the private institutions with the highest measures of academic reputation in the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking do not have strong religious identities (Mixon, Lyon, and Beatty 2004; *U.S. News & World Report* 2025).

Similarly, many hospitals and social service agencies founded by religious bodies operate on the basis of management and administrative procedures used by any modern organization that has similar goals. Some religious agencies take pride in the fact that they are secularized in their operations—that they use conventional business practices to operate. Some, like Catholic hospitals and hospital systems that grew tremendously in the twentieth century, struggle to negotiate between their religious values and the ever-present secular pressures to conform and survive (Wall 2011; White 2013).

At the micro level, the orientation individuals have to religious authority structures is a phenomenon deeply impacted by the process of secularization and requires further assessment. A secularized society is one in which people will feel free to believe and act in ways that disregard, differ from, or even go against the prescribed views of religious authority structures. People's views and behaviors will be characterized by autonomy and choice. Echoing Sheila Larson from *Habits of the Heart*, supermodel Cindy Crawford has given a very succinct statement of modern religious autonomy: "I'm religious but in my own personal way. I always say that I have a Cindy Crawford religion—it's my own" (quoted in Yamane 1997:116).

Although we have an abundance of survey data on individuals' religious beliefs and practices, surveys rarely ask respondents whether and how religion affects their everyday decision making. One bit of longitudinal data that is useful comes from the "Middletown" studies. Stark and colleagues often cited evidence from Middletown as disconfirming secularization theory. For example, Finke and Stark pointed out that "in 1931 there was one 'house of worship' for every 763 residences of Muncie, Indiana (sociology's famous Middletown). By 1970, there was one church or temple for every 473 residents—a pattern of growth that applies across the nation" (Finke and Stark 1988:47). They failed to consider other findings from the Middletown studies, however. For example, Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick (1983) show that individuals in Middletown were much less likely over time to believe that "Christianity is the one true religion" or that "it is wrong to attend movies on Sunday," and more likely to believe that "evolution is more accurate than [the Book of] Genesis." This indicates a decline in the scope of religious authority at the individual or micro level.

A panel discussion at an academic conference many years ago highlights the back-and-forth that has taken place in sociology over the issue of secularization. As Mark Chaves (1991:292–93) recounted the event,

On the panel were Peter Berger, a long-time proponent of the classical secularization thesis, and Andrew Greeley, a long-time critic of secularization theses in any form. After a series of exchanges in which Professor Greeley debunked every claim and piece of evidence presented by Professor Berger in favor of the secularization thesis, Peter Berger is said to have exclaimed, “But Andy, *something* must have changed!”

The primary assertion of the new secularization theorists is that some form of secularization is occurring at societal, organizational, and individual levels. According to Chaves (1991:293), “We may not live in a society with less religion. I suspect we never will. But we do live in a society with less *religious authority*. That, Peter Berger might have said to Andrew Greeley, is what has changed.”

Future Prospects

By the turn of the twenty-first century, debates between proponents of these different alternatives to the secularization paradigm had run their course, and each was subject to its own criticism. The new paradigm was seen as too parochial in being elaborated by Warner explicitly as a theory of religion in the United States. The religious economies model was criticized for its rational choice assumptions and the failure of other scholars to document a connection between pluralism and religious vitality. The strong program overrepresented Protestant Christianity in the United States and pro-religious outcomes. Neosecularization theory’s focus on the growing independence of secular social spheres from religious authorities was faulted for its Western and Christo-centric biases (Bender et al. 2012; Gorski and Ates 2008).

Today, the sociology of religion is in a stage of post-paradigmatic growth, with growing scholarly pressure toward recognizing the diversity and complexity of religion in the contemporary world. In various ways, scholars are attempting to push the field beyond the limitations of all existing approaches (Yamane 2016).

1. *Beyond Christianity.* According to Bender et al. (2012), too often in sociology religion means Christianity, and Christianity is equated with certain Protestant traditions. This is evident not only in the large number of studies across paradigms that focus on evangelical Protestantism in the United States but in some cases in the very definition of religion. Expanding the field’s vision to include other world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism), as well as other religious manifestations (“spiritual not religious”), challenges the field to move beyond seeing religion as coherent systems of meaning focused on otherworldly ends.
2. *Beyond congregations.* Beginning with Durkheim, many sociologists have strongly distinguished between the sacred and profane, and found the sacred safely located in

various “God boxes” (churches, synagogues, mosques, temples). Today, scholars are pushing beyond congregations to understand the ways in which religion is *a part of* rather than *apart from* everyday life. The concept of “lived religion” noted in Chapter 1 draws attention to the ways in which religion manifests itself at home and work, in public life, in understandings of health and illness, and beyond. As religion spills over into the world of everyday life, the boundary between the sacred and profane is blurred, and new religious worlds are opened up for sociological investigation (Ammerman 2014).

3. *Beyond beliefs.* Owing in part to its Christo-centrism, sociologists have been overly concerned with the cognitive dimension of religion. As in sociology generally, greater emphasis has been placed recently on religious practices rather than beliefs. For example, in a study of a secular nonprofit organization that provides meals for people with AIDS, Courtney Bender (2003) finds that the way religion manifests itself in this setting is not in how people talk about what they believe, but in what they do. More recently, Bender (2010) has examined how spirituality is deeply rooted in practices like homeopathic healing, yoga, shamanistic drumming, and spiritual belly dance. Getting beyond an excessive focus on beliefs allows sociologists to include more phenomena in their purview, especially ones that are not clearly marked as “religious.”
4. *Beyond borders.* Bender et al. (2012) criticize the sociology of religion in the United States for parochialism, but scholars in every country tend to focus on phenomena within their national borders. This is true despite the common recognition of the reality of globalization and the fact that religious groups were probably the first transcultural or transnational institutions and religious individuals among the first migrants (Levitt 2003). Nonetheless, the growing field of transnational studies highlights the flow of people, organizations, and resources across national borders. It emphasizes, for example, the ongoing connections people have with their communities of origin and how those origins continue to influence religious development in the new locale so that it is impossible to understand what is happening religiously without having a transnational perspective (Levitt 2004).
5. *Beyond religion.* Perhaps the ultimate movement beyond dominant approaches is the increasing recognition of the importance of religious “nones” (including atheists, agnostics, and the religiously unaffiliated) and apostasy (the process of leaving religion). According to the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012), the global average for religiously unaffiliated population is 16 percent, and in six countries, a majority of the population is religiously unaffiliated: the Czech Republic (76 percent), North Korea (71 percent), Estonia (60 percent), Japan (57 percent), Hong Kong (56 percent), and China (52 percent). As the percentage of individuals claiming no religious preference continues to grow in many countries, we might expect that this trend will continue into the future, since one of the strongest predictors of being a religious none is having parents who are religious nones. At the

same time, many nones are converts from religion to no religion. In a word, they are apostates. As Zuckerman (2012) notes, apostasy comes from the Greek word *apostasia*, meaning “a defection or revolt.” What the growing (at least in some countries) number of nones and apostates means for the future of religion is an open question that sociologists of religion will be grappling with for some time. Their existence, however, challenges scholars to treat *no religion* not as a residual category but as a significant part of the religious dynamics of the contemporary world.

Whether in the long run the sociology of religion will consolidate around one or a few paradigmatic approaches is uncertain. In the near term, it seems likely to continue to build on past insights while pushing beyond their particular blindspots. In this textbook, we do our best to incorporate work that pushes the boundaries of the sociological study of religion as just described. But textbooks necessarily reflect the current state of scholarship in a field, so we are constrained to present the sociology of religion within the limits of what empirical studies have to offer. Each edition of this textbook—the first being published in 1984 and this (the eighth) being published four decades later—is a product of its time and place.

Sociology as a discipline emerged in the nineteenth century during a period of dramatic social change, including religious change. The founders wanted to understand that change to help move society in a positive direction, with or without religion. We live today in the late modern era, an era that definitely includes religion. Therefore, sociologists of religion are uniquely situated to contribute to the sociological understanding, and perhaps also the direction, of an ever-changing social reality.

Summary and Looking Forward

Sociology as a discipline emerged in response to the profound social changes taking place as the world became “modern.” Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and others—the founding theorists of the discipline of sociology—sought to understand these changes so as to be able to control and shape them for the betterment of society. Each had a different perspective on the role religion would play in modern society, but none thought religion would undergo the modernization process unchanged.

These theorists gave rise to the secularization paradigm in the sociology of religion. Secularization has been viewed by sociologists as one of the most powerful forces in the modern world. Yet there are marked differences in what are considered its core characteristics. Berger defined it as loss of sacredness, depicting secularization as undermining the sacred canopy enveloping all of society and making religious choice mandatory (“the heretical imperative”). Bellah viewed secularization as a process of religious evolution, as an increased complexity in religious symbolism and religious structures. As religion evolves, it becomes more differentiated, “an infinite possibility thing.” Among these possibilities is a radically personalized form of religion they dub “Sheilaism.”

In response to social events highlighting the continuing vitality of religion in the modern world, various new paradigms arose to challenge the “old” secularization paradigm. These

include Warner's "new paradigm" for the study of religion in the United States, Stark and colleagues' religious economies model, and what Smilde and May call the "strong program" in the sociology of religion. Each of these understands the challenge to secularization differently, but all offer vigorous critiques and alternatives.

As a response to the new paradigm critiques, neosecularization theorists insist that secularization needs to be understood as the declining scope of religious authority at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the societal (macro) level of analysis, secularization is characterized by institutional differentiation and increased autonomy of various aspects of life (business, politics, recreation, etc.) from religious authority. At the meso level, it involves organizations adopting a more "worldly," rational, utilitarian, and empirical—scientific approach to decision making. At the micro level, individuals do not orient their understandings of or actions in the world to the dictates of religious authority.

Since secularization theory began to be challenged in the 1980s and 1990s, there has been no dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion. Studies continue to flourish but with no major guiding perspective. Instead, efforts are being made to push the field forward, getting it to go beyond various limitations: (1) beyond Christianity, (2) beyond congregations, (3) beyond beliefs, (4) beyond borders, and (5) beyond religion. Whenever possible—subject to the constraints of available studies—this textbook attempts to press beyond these limitations.

Concluding Questions: Are there ways in which the sociological study of religion is limited that are not captured in the five limitations listed in this chapter? Based on your experience and understanding of religion in the modern world, where should sociologists of religion be looking in the future?