

CSK - SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION TEXT

CHAP 2: STUDYING RELIGION - SUMMARY NOTES,

P. 29:

- **Side Note:** People act on their beliefs; a simplified version of Thomas' Theorem, with which we opened the syllabus: "If people believe something to be true, it is true in its consequences"—or, more accurately, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." This statement captures both dimensions the CSK emphasize and that, in fact, are the essence of all the social sciences: for humans, beliefs and behavior always go together.
- Various methods are used to pursue the two kinds of questions that are raised in regard to religion: how many/much? (quantitative) and why? (qualitative). And since research costs time, energy, and resources questions are always pursued out of some purpose.
- The classic forms of research in the sociology of religion are surveys, questionnaires, interviews, historical analysis and comparison, and participant observation.

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- Survey research does not often adequately deal with the multidimensional complexity of religious phenomena and is especially suspect for the classic issues attending this methodology: ways in which the question frames the likely answers and the difficulty in interpreting the respondents' meanings (the isomorphic challenge).
- Participant observation or ethnographic research can provide especially rich data, but this is an exceedingly demanding and time consuming approach, is not done very often, and also suffers from difficulties in interpreting participants' meanings. This is especially true because of the fact that "religious life has a tentative, fragile, casuistical character...."

P. 36;

- As some recent studies suggest, perhaps the best methodological approach is a combination of survey research and in-depth interviews.

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- Comparative-historical research is also challenging; the data itself can be suspect or incomplete, meanings of words change over time, there are inherent difficulties in establishing comparable categories of comparison, different historical contexts have to be accounted for, and there is a tendency for researchers to hypostatize the data.
- Theories—attempts at explanation—are obviously crucial to making sense of data and this may be especially true in the area of religion.
- **Side Note:** While the natural sciences proceed on the dictum: "To know, in order to predict, in order to control," my belief is that it makes more sense for the social sciences to proceed on the maxim: "To explore, in order to understand, in order to anticipate."
- Needless to say, different theories offer different interpretations and understandings.

P. 38, 39:

- Functionalist theories:

- (1) the classic form ala Durkheim, said here [the instructor disagrees] not to fit the modern situation;
- (2) middle-range theories spawned by functionalism;
 - a. deprivation theory
 - b. civil religion theory
 - c. secularization theory

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- Conflict theories

- (1) the classic form espoused by Marx, which basically dismissed religion [here again the instructor disagrees with this reasoning]
- (2) tangential theories spawned by conflict theory:
 - a. liberation theology
 - b. feminist theory
 - c. social drama theory, of four parts:
 - i. breach or initial conflict
 - ii. escalating crisis
 - iii. adjustive or redressive action
 - iv. reintegration or schism

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- Major paradigm shift (?)

Secularization theory led to pluralism theory with the advent of new religious movements and the revitalization or resurgence of already existing religious traditions, especially those that were conservative, evangelical, and/or fundamentalist in their orientation. CSK see this as establishing religion as “real or as an independent variable” [although this instructor does not see this as a change.]

- Rational choice theory: here we do come upon something relatively new, as an outgrowth of exchange theory, but much more explicitly offering almost an economic model of a “rational actor” calculating relative costs and benefits in his or her religious beliefs and activities [sort of a much more complex version of Pascal’s Wager].

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- Some important components, aspects, or caveats regarding rational choice theory:

- (1) the precise meaning of rational is problematic
- (2) there are simultaneously multiple and competing rationales for action [and it should be noted rationales and rational choice do not mean the same thing]
- (3) choosing rationally means different things to different people and, in fact, may mean different things to the same person at different times or even in regard to different choices
- (4) the choice-making process is never simple [or, we might say, it is not linear]
- (5) not to decide is, itself, a decision
- (6) determining the motivations behind apparently rational choosing is very difficult and open to misinterpretation

- (7) any discussion of motivations moves in the direction of various psychodynamic theories of behavior
- (8) religion is an institution different from all other social institutions
- (9) in many instances [especially those in which society and religion are congruent] one no more chooses one's religion than one chooses one's sex, ethnicity, or clan membership
- (10) finally, it may be that rational choice theory is not so much a theory of religion as it advances a theory about what religion *does* or *provides* for some people

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• **Side Note:** CSW's question, "Why would anybody want to do that?" (the question to which good social science theory provides a reasonable, consistent answer, is comparable to the one we have taken from Thomas F. O'Dea: "What's going on here, anyway?")

P. 48-50:

As with all sociology, the sociology of religion works with aggregate or group data; it can tell nothing about specific individuals.

Sociologie Religieuse

• **Side Note:**

This is not what we're doing in this class, except in passing. In his book *The Invisible Religion* Thomas Luckmann refers to this, somewhat deprecatingly, as "parish sociology" or "a rather narrowly conceived sociography of the churches." This approach has its place, but it basically takes religions at face value in their (official) institutionalized forms, treating them primarily as just another social organization. In this form, the issues which the sociology of religion addresses turn out to be, as Luckmann notes, "defined by the institutional interests of religious organizations."

• As such this approach to the sociology of religion misses (or deliberately avoids) what Luckmann calls "the central question of the sociology of religion which is, at the same time, an important problem for sociological theory as a whole: What are the conditions under which 'transcendent,' superordinated, and 'integrating' structures of meaning are socially objectivated?"

• It is these socially objectivated meaning structures that function to (a) integrate the routines of everyday life and (b) legitimate the crises of everyday life. (Here we can see Luckmann's affinity with Berger – in fact, they coauthored *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*).

P. 50-54

Why Study Religion?

- There are many reasons, some of which we have identified in class:
 - (1) it is a fundamental aspect of all human societies;
 - (2) in its various forms it has shaped and influenced individuals, societies, and cultures;

- (3) it has been a powerful force effecting human history from time immemorial;
- (4) it contributes to both the best and the worst of human practices;
- (5) it plays numerous roles in the everyday lives of individuals;
- (6) it is one of the most defining characteristics in terms of which individuals and groups differentiate themselves;
- (7) it addresses quite different aspects of human experience than any other set of social/cultural practices or institutions.

P. 54-56:

Implicit Religion

- A polysemous term, based on the writings of Edward Bailey, which suggests there is “an irreducible spiritual or religious dimension within human existence, that everybody has some ‘ultimate’ or set of ultimates.”
- **Side Note:** Remember the conclusion that is suggested by the list of characteristics of the human animal derived from philosophical anthropology that was introduced in class.
- Implicit religion seems to have three simultaneous dimensions:
 - (1) commitment(s)
 - (2) integrating foci
 - (3) intensive concerns with extensive effects
- Implicit religion can exist at the micro level of the inner disposition of individuals and at the macro level of group behaviors. It can occur in what Thomas Luckmann has called the “little transcendences” of human life, as well as the “great transcendences” of the world religions. At this macro level it finds echoes in Tillich’s “ultimate concern.”
- **Side Note:** Luckmann’s “little transcendences” resonate with Berger’s “signals of transcendence” that argue for an inductive anthropology of “religious” faith as presented in class.

Implicit religion has a certain resonance with a set of concepts [which we will be exploring later] variously described as civil religion, civic religion, or invisible religion.