

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND CURRENT CONTROVERSIES IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

The sociology of religion is experiencing a period of substantial organizational and intellectual growth. Recent theoretical and empirical papers on the sociology of religion appearing in top journals in sociology have generated both interest and controversy. We begin with a selective overview of research on religious beliefs and commitments. Second, we investigate the influence of religion on politics, the family, health and well-being, and on free space and social capital. Finally, we review rational choice theories in the sociology of religion and the controversies surrounding applications of these perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

The sociology of religion is experiencing a period of substantial organizational and intellectual progress. Social scientific organizations devoted to the study of religion have experienced unprecedented growth in meetings attendance and membership, and a sociology of religion section was recently added in the American Sociological Association. Recent theoretical and empirical papers

on the sociology of religion appearing in top journals have generated interest and controversy. Indeed, for the first time since the 1960s, scholars who typically specialize in other substantive areas are doing research on, or theorizing about, the sociology of religion. This development is a tremendous surprise to many sociologists, who accepted the expectations of secularization theories that promised declining importance of religion in social life, diminished strength for religious organizations, and waning religious commitment among individuals. However, by the late 1970s, events throughout the world revealed an undeniably strong influence of religion in the late twentieth century. For social scientists, the rise of fundamentalist religion in the United States and elsewhere (Marty & Appleby 1991), and the public debates about cults and new religious movements, were probably the most significant events that led to a reevaluation of the importance of religion. Theoretical and empirical connections between the sociology of religion and other areas of sociology—especially family, medical sociology, and social movements—also played a role in reviving interest in the sociology of religion.

Many contemporary controversies are rooted in debates between scholars wedded to secularization theories and those who explain religious behaviors and trajectories through a different lens. Secularization theory has a long history in the social sciences and played a considerable role in the development of the sociology of religion (Hadden 1987). Secularization is an ideological impulse strongly rooted in the Western Enlightenment, and one that resonates with the conventional wisdom of many Western elites (Hadden 1987, Lechner 1991, Stark & Bainbridge 1985). Secularization theorists generally agree that societal-level differentiation is a master process driving secularization (Dobbelaere 1985, Lechner 1991, Tschannen 1991, Chaves 1994). Yet, theorists are divided on the implications and scope of the perspective. Tschannen (1991) arrays seven secularization theorists according to their views on 12 separate dimensions (among these are differentiation, pluralization, rationalization, scientization, and unbelief). Dobbelaere (1985) argues that there are two discrete secularization paradigms with four distinct levels of analysis. Recent advocates reformulate secularization theories to focus on religious “authority” (Chaves 1994). The wide variety of secularization perspectives and interpretations, combined with a dearth of concrete operational hypotheses, led some critical commentators to argue that the perspective is not a theory at all (Hadden 1987). Whatever its status as a theory, many scholars still investigate religious phenomena from the vantage point of secularization, and debates about its relevance are far from over.

Critiques of secularization theory began to emerge as evolutionary functionalist theories lost favor in the 1970s. Sociologists objected to romantic notions of a unified collective consciousness and the imposition of Western European cultural and economic trajectories on the rest of the world. Historical

sociologists and anthropologists noted that the premodern world was fraught with diverse religious beliefs and practices, and even unbelief (Douglas 1982). Other theorists argued that differentiation and disenchantment are often counterposed by dedifferentiation and reenchantment (Tiryakian 1992), and that the functional differentiation of religious institutions does not prevent religious influences on politics, the economy, culture, and other aspects of social life (Beyer 1994). The complexity of religious phenomena—and the profound importance of individual experiences for religious action—were difficult to comprehend from the lens of secularization theories. While many scholars work diligently to try to salvage this framework, even such luminary secularization theorists as Peter Berger have rejected it (*Christian Century*, Oct. 29, 1997). Alternative perspectives were lacking until the late 1970s, when Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge began the work that would culminate in their influential theoretical opuses (1985, 1987), and when scholars examining social movements began to turn their attention to religious movements (Hall 1988a, Snow 1993, Rochford 1985, Zald 1982). Fresh theoretical perspectives, and a precipitous increase in methodological rigor, led many to proclaim the ascendance of a “new paradigm” rooted in rational choice theory and empirical analysis (Warner 1993).

We begin our review with a selective overview of research on religious beliefs and commitments, with a slant towards research on the United States. Next, we examine the influence of religion on: (a) politics, (b) the family, (c) health and well-being, and (d) free space and social capital. The remainder of the review presents rational choice theories of religion and the substantive and theoretical controversies surrounding their applications.

Religious Beliefs and Commitments in the Contemporary United States

Scholarly examinations of religious beliefs, participation, and affiliation have focused on three elements: (a) the distribution of beliefs and commitments, (b) trends in beliefs and attachments, and (c) predictors of religiosity. Religious beliefs are remarkably salient in the United States, and General Social Survey (GSS) data reveal that: (a) nearly 63% believe in God without doubts, while only 2.2% do not believe in God, (b) around a third of Americans believe that the Bible is the actual word of God, and more than 80% think it divinely inspired, (c) 77% believe in heaven, 63% in hell, and 58% in the devil. Trends in these beliefs are difficult to document because of changes in question wording and sampling procedures. However, analyses of Gallup data seem to indicate a slight drop in some measures of religious orthodoxy, particularly biblical inerrancy (Glenn 1987, Greeley 1989, Smith 1992), though early polls did not use comparable sampling or call-back procedures. In contrast, beliefs in

God and beliefs in an afterlife are remarkably stable (Greeley 1989, Harley & Firebaugh 1993).

Levels of religious participation and rates of membership in religious organizations remain high compared to other nations and other voluntary activities (Verweij et al 1997). GSS data indicate that 61% of Americans claim membership in a religious organization, 29% claim to attend church weekly or more often, and 45% report attending church at least monthly. There is considerable debate about the specific level of participation in the United States, focusing on the validity of self-reported church attendance in survey data. Some researchers claim that Americans overreport their church attendance, and that actual rates of attendance are about one half of what people claim in surveys—suggesting that around 22% of Americans attend religious services in a given week (Hadaway et al 1993). Still, even this conservative estimate of rates of religious participation is far higher than weekly rates of activity in other voluntary organizations. Critical assessments of rates of overreporting point to problems in determining the population of church affiliates, the nature of attendance reports, and anomalies created by low survey response rates; these studies suggest that overreporting is far less common (Hout & Greeley 1998, Woodberry 1998). Further, most investigations find no significant trend in religious participation, or a slight decrease accounted for by Catholic declines in the 1960s (Hout & Greeley 1987, Glenn 1987, Greeley 1989, but see Presser & Stinson 1998). Americans also donate substantial amounts of time and money to religious organizations, averaging \$440 per year for households in the GSS (Hoge & Yang 1994). Indeed, contributions to the top 15 *reporting* denominations exceeded \$18 billion in 1996, and 6 of the 10 largest denominations did not report contributions (Bedell 1997). Contributions, combined with expenditures on other religious activities and items (e.g. literature, music, clothing), make religion a huge industry in the United States (Moore 1994) and a large component of the nonprofit sector of the economy (Wuthnow 1991b).

One of the most interesting aspects of religiosity is that commitments are divided among competing groups. Sectarian differences and religious diversity are ubiquitous throughout the world; religious pluralism is often viewed, however, as a hallmark of religion in the United States (Tiryakian 1993). There are over 2100 religious groups in America, including a variety of cults or new religious movements (Melton 1996). Of these groups 133 report a confirmed membership of over 55 million, and 137 million adherents (Bradley et al 1992). GSS data (1989–1996) indicate that 25% of Americans identify themselves as Catholic, nearly 26% affiliate with Baptist or conservative Protestant bodies (e.g. Assembly of God, Churches of Christ, Church of God in Christ, Nazarene, Pentecostal), liberal and moderate Protestants (e.g. Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodists, and Lutherans) account for 29%, more than 9% are non-

religious, 2.5% are Jewish, and almost 2% claim other non-Christian faiths. Religious identification varies considerably across racial and ethnic groups. Among African Americans: 54% claim Baptist affinities, and another 11% identify with conservative sects like the Church of God in Christ; 11% are Methodist, only 7% are Catholic, and less than 2% affiliate with non-Christian groups like the various Islamic groups (Ellison & Sherkat 1990). Ethnic diversity is having an impact on religious pluralism, and research has begun to investigate ethnic immigrant religions (Warner & Wittner 1998), though much more is warranted. It is also notable that religious affiliations are concentrated in particular regions of the country. Catholics are concentrated in the Northeast and Southwest, while Lutherans are plentiful in the upper Midwest. Baptists command the South, and Mormons are most common in the intermountain West (Bradley et al 1992). Approximately one third of Americans switch religious affiliations, and nearly a third of switchers make more than one switch (Roof 1989). Both survey data and denominational statistics indicate that conservative Protestant sects, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and nonreligion have seen marginal "growth" from religious switching or other sources, while moderate and liberal Protestant churches tend to be losing ground (Bedell 1997, Ellison & Sherkat 1990, Hadaway & Marler 1994, but see Smith 1992). Contrary to popular opinion, however, rates of religious switching are not increasing (Sullins 1993).

Research consistently finds religious beliefs and behaviors to be a function of: (a) family and denominational socialization, (b) gender, (c) social status, and (d) life course events and aging. Parents influence their children's religious beliefs and commitments both directly through the socialization of beliefs and commitments (Hoge et al 1994, Kelley & De Graaf 1997, Myers 1996, Sherkat 1998) and by channeling other social relationships (Cornwall 1989). Parents are more likely to transmit religiosity and affiliation when they have common religious commitments (Myers 1996, Sandomirsky & Wilson 1990, Sherkat 1991), and conservative Protestant and Catholic spouses are more likely to win children's loyalty when spouses are divided (Nelsen 1990). Conservative Protestant sects socialize their members to have more traditional religious beliefs, and to participate in religious activities more often. Consequently, members of conservative religious denominations are less likely to become irreligious, and they donate more time and money to religious organizations (Hoge & Yang 1994, Iannaccone et al 1995, Sherkat 1998, Sherkat & Wilson 1995).

Women participate more frequently in religious organizations, are less likely to become irreligious, and hold significantly more orthodox religious beliefs than men (De Vaus & McAllister 1987, Miller & Hoffman 1995, Sherkat 1998, Wilson & Sherkat 1994). Despite seemingly misogynist gender-role prescriptions and proscriptions (Peek et al 1991), religious organizations

provide social settings and support that encourage women's participation and even allow for considerable leadership opportunities (Bartkowski 1997, McNamara 1984, Stark & Bainbridge 1985). Further, young women may be socialized into religious beliefs and commitments more vigorously and more successfully, and their structural location in the home may help solidify and perpetuate these commitments (De Vaus & McAllister 1987). Theorists have also speculated that higher risk aversion among women may lead them to be more religious (Miller & Hoffman 1995).

Social status has varying influences on religious beliefs and commitments. Higher levels of education have a negative impact on measures of traditional religious beliefs; however, education also spurs participation in religious organizations (Iannaccone 1997, Johnson 1997, Sherkat 1998). People with higher incomes donate more money to religious organizations, though their contributions as a percentage of income are generally found to be lower (Hoge & Yang 1994). Individuals with higher incomes tend to substitute contributions to religious organizations for attendance (Iannaccone 1997). Educational attainment increases the likelihood of relinquishing affiliation with religious organizations, and exceeding the educational attainment of peers in the denomination of origin prompts apostasy and religious switching (Sherkat 1991, Sherkat & Wilson 1995).

The close association between religious commitments, family formation, and childrearing evidences itself in a number of life course influences on religious behaviors. Generally, marriage and childrearing boost religious participation, while divorce and cohabitation reduce religious activity (Stolzenberg et al 1995, Thornton et al 1992, Myers 1996, Sherkat 1998). Importantly, the timing of life course events has been shown to mediate their influence on religious behaviors. When individuals marry and have children at "normatively appropriate" ages, they will benefit more from the social support provided to parents in religious organizations. Research shows that people who have children in their late 20s or early 30s increase their religious participation while those who rear their children earlier do not (Stolzenberg et al 1995). Religious intermarriage increases rates of religious switching (Lazerwitz 1995, Sherkat 1991, Sandomirsky & Wilson 1990), as spouses jointly negotiate religious commitments. Aging boosts religious participation, perhaps because of increased integration, desire for social support, or a heightened need for explanations of the meaning of life (Stark & Bainbridge 1987). Researchers are divided on whether cohort or period effects drive overall rates of religious participation (Chaves 1989), though persuasive analyses indicate that cohort and period effects are accounted for by life cycle factors (Firebaugh & Harley 1991, Hout & Greeley 1990).

Finally, scholars have investigated the importance of region and geographic mobility on religiosity. Regional concentrations of denominations have led to

some characteristic patterns in the United States, generally described as a more “devoted” South and a relatively irreligious West (Shibley 1996, Smith et al 1998, Stark & Bainbridge 1985). Recent research demonstrates that migration to less committed regions diminishes religious devotion, while moving to more pious areas enhances religious participation and the importance of faith (Smith et al 1998). African Americans from the South, and especially the rural South, have high rates of religious participation and are unlikely to switch to nonreligion (Ellison & Sherkat 1995, Sherkat & Ellison 1991). Additionally, geographic mobility often disrupts social ties and leads to changes in religious affiliation, including conversion to new religious movements (Sherkat 1991, Stark & Bainbridge 1985).

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON SOCIAL LIFE

Renewed interest in the sociology of religion has been stimulated by attention given to the effects of religious beliefs, commitments, and institutions in other arenas of social life. Not only has religion stubbornly refused to disappear, it continues to hold sway over (a) political beliefs and commitments, (b) family relations, (c) health and well-being, and (d) free social space and social capital.

Religion, Social Movements, and Politics

The study of the connection between religion and politics was given new life by the “rise” of politicized Christianity (mostly conservative) in the 1970s, and revolutionary Islamic movements in the Middle East (Jelen 1998, Marty & Appleby 1991). Many scholars have long downplayed the significance of religion in world politics, yet longstanding political conflicts in Ireland, India, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Bosnia, and a host of other places have distinctively religious roots (Hadden 1987, Smith 1996a). Religious beliefs, commitments, and resources are an important part of building and maintaining ethnic identities, and they provide the ideological and actual resources brought to bear in ethnic conflicts ranging from the struggles over civil rights in the United States, to economic justice in Latin America, to Islamic and Zionist movements in the Middle East (Beyer 1994, Billings & Scott 1994, Casanova 1994, Moaddel 1996, Smith 1996a). For most of the 1970s and 1980s, scholars examining social movements neglected cultural influences on social movement activism. Yet, resource mobilization theorists pointed out the powerful importance of religion in the struggle for African American civil rights—providing organizational and symbolic resources, leadership, a premobilized constituency embedded in dense social networks, and an indigenous source of funding—and this helped call attention to the connection between religion and social movements (Morris 1984, Oberschall 1993, Zald 1982). Recent developments in so-

cial movement theory have emphasized the importance of cultural institutions for social movements (Johnston & Klandermans 1995, Morris & Mueller 1992). This cultural turn in the analysis of social movements has led to a re-examination of how religious ideologies and institutions might: (a) provide a groundwork for the framing of movement issues, (b) enhance the resonance of movement positions, (c) generate social legitimacy to enhance mobilization and stave off repression, and (d) lend narratives to social movements that help provide a rationale for action and a foundation for collective identities and group solidarity (Hunt et al 1994, Oberschall & Kim 1996, Smith 1996a). Among the recent findings from studies investigating the connection between religion and social movements are that “identity” and “constitutionalist” Christian ideologies and organizational resources are essential elements of right wing hate groups (Aho 1990, Barkun 1994), that activists from liberal Protestant and Catholic groups were instrumental in movements for legalizing abortion (Staggenborg 1991), that conservative Christianity provides considerable symbolic and actual resources for antiabortion groups like Operation Rescue (Blanchard 1994, Williams & Blackburn 1996), and that faithful Catholics and liberal Protestants were pivotal in movements opposing US policy in Central America (Smith 1996b).

In the United States, religious beliefs and commitments have a substantial impact on politicized beliefs about moral issues like pornography (Sherkat & Ellison 1997), abortion (Cook et al 1992), and homosexuality (Leege & Kellstedt 1993). The apparent gulf between “orthodox” religious adherents who base their commitments on the authority of sacred texts and “progressive” congregants who situate morals in modern social contexts led some to speculate that politicized moral issues are increasingly polarized between organized camps in a “culture war” (Hunter 1991). Yet, recent investigations fail to find trends in the polarization of a range of political and moral values within and across religious groups (Hoffman & Miller 1998, Davis & Robinson 1996, DiMaggio et al 1996), and several inquiries cast serious doubt on the salience of orthodox versus progressive identities (Williams 1997). One investigation suggests that conservative Protestants were not increasingly mobilized in presidential elections, and that a shift toward the Democrats by liberal Protestants is the main trend in partisanship (Manza & Brooks 1997). Yet, Layman (1997) finds that members of conservative Protestant denominations have become more Republican since 1980, and that religious commitment increasingly predicts Republican voting. While rumors of war are exaggerated, contemporary research has demonstrated a continuing influence of religion on political beliefs and commitments in the contemporary United States, and a growing body of literature documents how religious beliefs and commitments inform political values and behaviors (Jelen 1998, Leege & Kellstedt 1993, Woodberry & Smith 1998).

Religion and Family Issues

The past decade has seen a modest resurgence of interest in the links between religion and family. An earlier generation of research tended to focus on Catholic-Protestant differences in family values and practices (Lenski 1961), yet many of these differences have disappeared because of upward mobility and assimilation of Catholic ethnic groups, considerable diversity among Protestant bodies, religious intermarriage, and changes in Catholicism since the 1960s (Alwin 1986, Ellison & Sherkat 1993a). Recent research on the religion-family connection has examined (a) adolescent sexuality, (b) marriage and fertility, (c) childrearing, and (d) gender roles.

Religious factors clearly influence adolescent sexual attitudes and reproductive behavior. Young women who attend services regularly, value religion in their lives, and maintain denominational ties are less likely than others to become sexually active prior to marriage, or to use contraceptives (Brewster et al 1998, Thornton & Camburn 1989, Forste & Heaton 1988, Goldscheider & Mosher 1991, Kahn et al 1990). While members of other denominations have liberalized their views about premarital sex, active conservative Protestants have not (Petersen & Donnenwerth 1997). Interestingly, among white adolescent women, the influence of conservative Protestant affiliation on the likelihood of remaining a virgin actually increased during the 1980s, perhaps due to the heightened activity of Christian advocacy groups such as True Love Waits (Brewster et al 1998).

Conservative Protestants marry earlier than members of other religious groups, including Catholics (Mosher et al 1992, Hammond et al 1993). Couples' church attendance and religious devotion are associated with greater marital happiness and adjustment, and lower risk of conflict (including domestic violence) and dissolution (Filsinger & Wilson 1984, Call & Heaton 1997, Ellison et al 1999a). Embeddedness within religious communities may validate couples' relationship commitments, encourage values of love and caring, and promote the subordination of egoistic desires (Scanzoni & Arnett 1987, Larson & Goltz 1989). In addition, same-faith marriages are happier and less likely to end in divorce than mixed-faith marriages (Glenn 1982, Heaton & Pratt 1990). The degree of theological distance separating partners is linked with marital dissatisfaction and conflict (including domestic violence) (Ortega et al 1988, Curtis & Ellison 1998, Ellison et al 1999a), and heterogamous marriages involving one fundamentalist or sectarian partner are at greatest risk of disharmony and dissolution (Lehrer & Chiswick 1993).

Religious heterogamy also depresses fertility rates among Catholics and Mormons (Lehrer 1996). Fertility is comparatively high among conservative Protestants, which may result from pronatalist theologies and high levels of religious commitment (Marcum 1986), or from early marriage and low socio-

economic status (Mosher et al 1992, Hammond et al 1993). Catholics had higher fertility rates than Protestants for much of the twentieth century (Westoff & Jones 1979), yet this pattern has shifted dramatically. Among non-Hispanic whites, the total fertility rate is lower for Catholics than for Protestants, primarily because Catholics tend to marry later and less frequently (Mosher et al 1992, Sander 1993). Mormons have the highest total fertility rate of any major religious grouping, while the religiously unaffiliated have the lowest fertility rates and the greatest propensity toward childlessness (Heaton et al 1994, Mosher et al 1992).

After decades of neglect, recent studies have shed new light on religious influences on children and parenting. For instance, one analysis links the religiosity of mothers and maternal grandmothers with more positive mother-child bonds, even into young adulthood (Pearce & Axinn 1998). Moreover, a growing body of literature has focused on the distinctive childrearing philosophies of conservative Protestants. In popular advice manuals for parents, fundamentalist and evangelical authors express a marked preference for well-defined, gendered parental roles, and hierarchical (rather than egalitarian) parent-child relations (Bartkowski & Ellison 1995). In addition, conservative Protestants are disproportionately likely to endorse and use corporal punishment (Ellison & Sherkat 1993b, Ellison et al 1996). Although critics worry that evangelicalism legitimates authoritarian and abusive childrearing practices (Greven 1990, Capps 1995), such concerns may be exaggerated. Religious childrearing manuals offer careful advice on how to administer mild-to-moderate corporal punishment (Ellison 1996). Further, conservative Protestant parents yell at their children less frequently, and express verbal and physical affection to their children more often than other parents (Wilcox 1998). Evangelical fathers, and those who are generally more religious, also spend more quality time with their children than other fathers do (Wilcox 1999). Perhaps for these reasons, one recent study finds no systematic negative consequences of corporal punishment for conservative Protestant children (Ellison et al 1999b).

Religious beliefs and commitments are central for establishing and reinforcing gender roles. Scholars have found that traditional religious beliefs, regular religious attendance, and conservative Protestant and Mormon ties buttress support for patriarchal gender roles (Hertel & Hughes 1987, Peek et al 1991). At the same time, there is considerably greater heterogeneity on gender attitudes among conservative Protestants than among others (Gay et al 1996). Although conservative Protestant women—especially those in homogamous unions, and those with young children—exhibit weaker labor force attachment than do other women (Lehrer 1995, Sherkat 1999); a growing number of conservative Protestant women work outside the home, prompting selective accommodation and ideological work among clergy and church officials (Iannaccone & Miles 1990, Demmitt 1992). In addition, while the gender segrega-

tion of household labor is somewhat more pronounced among homogamous evangelical couples than others, this difference is modest in magnitude (Ellison & Bartkowski 1997). Further, ethnographic studies find that decision-making in evangelical households involves extensive collaboration and negotiation between partners, with little evidence of male dominance (McNamara 1984, Bartkowski 1997). Moreover, women's roles in conservative religious groups suggest considerable complexity, even when doctrines and organizational cultures marginalize women. Several studies identify numerous means by which women find fulfillment and even empowerment in conservative variants of Protestantism and Judaism (Stacey & Gerard 1990, Davidman 1990, Pevey et al 1996, Griffith 1997).

Religion, Health, and Well-Being

In recent years, multidisciplinary research on the connection between religion, health, and well-being has flourished. Studies using longitudinal data, sophisticated analytic techniques, and exhaustive multivariate controls have reported substantial positive effects of religious involvement on various mental and physical health outcomes, including mortality (Hummer et al 1999, Idler & Kasl 1992, Musick 1996, Oxman et al 1995, Strawbridge et al 1997, Williams et al 1991). Extending Durkheimian themes of religion as an integrative and regulatory social force (Levin 1996, Ellison & Levin 1998), scholars have begun specifying the processes through which religion may influence health and well-being, including the following: (a) health behaviors and individual lifestyles, (b) social integration and support, (c) psychological resources, (d) coping behaviors and resources, and (f) various positive emotions and healthy beliefs, among other factors.

Religious involvement may promote mental and physical well-being by regulating personal behaviors in ways that decrease the risk of disease. In a well-documented example, religious attendance and affiliation with conservative or sectarian groups are inversely related to alcohol, tobacco, and substance use and abuse, which in turn are linked with chronic diseases (Koenig et al 1994, Troyer 1988). Moreover, most religious communities have teachings that discourage various types of deviant behavior (e.g., risky sexual practices, illegal conduct), provide guidance on family issues, and direct life-style choices in ways that may reduce exposure to various stressful events and conditions (Ellison 1994).

Religious congregations offer regular opportunities for social activity and interaction and so provide fertile terrain for the cultivation of friendships. Communities of coreligionists are valuable sources of informal social support and emotional assistance, providing instrumental aid to those in need as well as companionship and comfort to members experiencing stressful life events

(Taylor & Chatters 1988, Ellison & George 1994). Many congregations sponsor formal programs designed to aid persons in need (e.g., antipoverty, health information, family services) as well as pastoral counseling (Caldwell et al 1992, Kimble 1995). Religious groups foster a sense of community, leading members to feel loved, valued, and cared for; religious support may be particularly effective because of shared norms of altruism and reciprocity, and common beliefs about suffering and helping behavior (Ellison 1994, Wuthnow 1994).

Recent studies reveal that religious involvement may foster mental and physical health by enhancing of self-esteem and personal efficacy, especially among certain populations such as elders and African Americans (McIntosh & Spilka 1990, Ellison 1993, Krause 1995). Individuals may enhance feelings of personal control or self-worth through cultivating a personal relationship with loving and caring “divine others” (gods), who can be engaged through prayer or meditation in a quest for solace and guidance (Pollner 1989, McIntosh & Spilka 1990, Ellison 1991). The nature of religious fellowship may contribute to favorable self-assessments by affirming and bolstering role identities and commitments or by fostering positive reflected appraisals (Ellison 1993).

It is increasingly evident that religious understandings and behaviors are common and effective coping strategies for many individuals dealing with a broad array of chronic and acute stressors, particularly bereavement and health problems (including physical disability) (Mattlin et al 1990, Idler 1995, Pargament et al 1990). A growing literature underscores the importance of religious cognitions in shaping the diverse ways in which individuals interpret and assign meaning to undesirable events and conditions, assess the degree of threat posed by such problems, and gauge their own capacity for dealing with them (Pargament 1997).

Investigators have also posited a wide range of additional mechanisms that may link religion with health, including positive emotions such as love, contentment, and forgiveness, as well as hope and optimism that often grow out of personal faith (Koenig et al 1997). Certain ritual or worship experiences—especially ecstatic or cathartic services—may confer mental and physical health benefits as well (Griffith et al 1984, Idler & Kasl 1997). At the same time, researchers in this burgeoning field are also beginning to explore aspects of religious communities—e.g., “toxic faith,” maladaptive religious coping, congregational conflicts—that may tax the health and well-being of their members (Ellison & Levin 1998).

Free Social Space and Social Capital

A growing literature suggests that religious communities may serve as “free social space” for certain marginalized groups and may provide members with

“social capital” that can be mobilized toward instrumental ends (Greeley 1997, Warner 1993). Social capital can contribute to positive outcomes by (a) providing values and norms that channel behavior in certain directions and away from others, (b) promoting the circulation of information, and (c) encouraging both long-term investments of time and energy and exchange relations, within contexts governed by norms of reciprocity, trust, and mutual obligation (Coleman 1988, Portes 1998). Throughout US history, various groups have responded to conditions of cultural and/or structural marginality by creating new religious organizations, cultivating new modes of spiritual expression, and forming semi-autonomous enclaves within established religious institutions (Warner 1993). In the broadest terms, these “free spaces” have served some or all of the following functions: (a) affording spiritual fulfillment and psychological satisfaction, (b) providing opportunities for authentic religious expression, and sustaining ethnic and other group cultures and identities, (c) articulating and addressing group-specific needs that are ignored in other arenas, and (d) promoting awareness of common interests and fostering collective mobilization (Warner 1997). Among the numerous contemporary examples of this diverse phenomenon are organizations focused on the spiritual needs and social concerns of gays and lesbians, such as the Metropolitan Community Church, and various caucuses and fellowships within mainstream denominations (Warner 1995); diverse feminist spirituality groups, including an array of pagan and Wiccan groups (Griffin 1995); and religious groups established by various racial/ethnic minorities.

Perhaps the preeminent example of religion as “free space” is found in the vibrant African American church tradition. For generations, religious institutions have occupied positions of symbolic centrality within African American communities, serving as vital sources of collective self-help and community development, moral reform, social service delivery, community leadership, and political mobilization (Lincoln & Mamiya 1990, Morris 1984, Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Emerging research is illuminating the complex roles of various new immigrant congregations—e.g., in (re)creating and (re)vitalizing religious traditions and ethnic communities within major US cities (see Warner & Wittner 1998). Taken together, these studies are showing that immigrant congregations—representing diverse faith traditions—often afford social networks, information and skills, and other resources that facilitate the psychological adjustment and upward mobility of recent entrants (Bankston & Zhou 1996, Kwon et al 1997, Chong 1998, Warner & Wittner 1998, Yang 1998).

In addition, religion has long been thought to deter crime and deviance, for a wide range of reasons: (a) the internalization of religious norms and moral messages; (b) the fear of divine punishment (the so-called “hellfire” effect); (c) the threat of social sanctions for coreligionists; (d) the desire for approval

from reference groups within religious communities; and (e) the lack of exposure to (or time for) deviant pursuits due to involvement in religious activities and networks, among other possible religious effects (Cochran et al 1988, Grasmick et al 1991, Evans et al 1995, Stark & Bainbridge 1997). However, studies in this area differ about how, and even whether, religion deters crime and delinquency. While some researchers have suggested that such a link may be spurious (Cochran et al 1994), others maintain that the effects of religion are contingent on the type or seriousness of the offense, or the distinctiveness of religious norms (vs. secular norms) pertaining to the offense (Tittle & Welch 1983). Proponents of the “moral communities” hypothesis argue that the power of religion to deter deviance is maximized in contexts (e.g., schools, congregations, communities) characterized by high overall levels of religiosity (Welch et al 1991, Stark 1996a) or religious homogeneity (Ellison et al 1997).

Recent studies have clarified religious differences in responses to crime and deviance. On average, conservative Protestants assign greater seriousness to most types of crimes than other persons (Curry 1996), and they endorse more retributive and punitive sanctions against offenders (Grasmick & McGill 1994). Provocative recent studies also suggest that prison religious programs and personal spirituality may reduce behavior problems among inmates and may lower the risk of recidivism in this population (Johnson et al 1997). Gaining a clearer understanding of the nature of the complex religion-crime connection should be an important priority for future research.

Interest in the constraining role of religion has been complemented in recent years by a renewed focus on the prosocial impact of faith communities, spurred partly by broader interests in communitarian themes. Although laboratory and field experiments generally report that religion has little bearing on spontaneous helping behaviors or individual altruism (Batson et al 1993), several studies show that survey respondents who report praying frequently are rated as “friendlier” and more cooperative by interviewers (Morgan 1983, Ellison 1992). Most religious communities promote voluntarism and charity, for a wide range of pragmatic and theological reasons. An emerging literature documents the prominent place of religious and religiously-sponsored organizations within the broad voluntary sector as well as how religious groups channel members into prosocial pursuits (Wuthnow 1991a,b). Individual-level studies consistently report that regular churchgoers devote more time than others to volunteer activities—in church-affiliated groups and throughout the broader community (Wilson & Janoski 1995).

Moreover, under the guidance of adult lay leaders and clergy, church-sponsored voluntary and charitable campaigns often mobilize young people for blood drives, supporting homeless shelters, programs aiding the poor and elderly, and the like—thus teaching vital lessons about civic commitment and

caring for others (Donahue & Benson 1995, Greeley 1997, Wuthnow 1995). Religious socialization is often directed toward broader issues of character and purpose (Donahue & Benson 1995). Religious communities may encourage young people to focus on long-range goals, perseverance, and conformity to rules. They also may prompt adults to make long-term investments in the lives of youths. Indeed, religious institutions are among the few remaining social settings that bring young people together with caring, unrelated adult role models on a regular basis (Ellison & Muller 1996). Such religious influences can be especially important during adolescence and young adulthood, when parental influence often diminishes.

A large body of research from the 1960s through the early 1970s examined the influence of religious commitments on life chances, focusing on how Catholics may be socialized into values and communities opposed to educational attainment. However, waning Catholic-Protestant differences and a dearth of theory to explain remaining religious variations in educational attainment stifled this research agenda by the 1980s (Darnell & Sherkat 1997). Recent research has revived interest in the connection between religion and educational attainment by focusing on values that might promote or proscribe educational pursuits. One recent study based on a national sample of high school students found that those who participate regularly in religious activities tend to devote somewhat more time to school work, cut classes less often, and are more likely to graduate than their nonreligious counterparts (Ellison & Muller 1996). A growing body of research examines distinctive forms of social capital within Catholic school communities and documents their positive effects on a wide range of educational and social outcomes (Bryk et al 1993). In addition, mounting evidence indicates that religious involvement promotes educational attainment among urban African American and immigrant youths and may divert them from oppositional youth cultures (Bankston & Zhou 1996, Freeman 1986).

However, the norms and values of cultural minorities sometimes conflict with those promoted in public education, and aggrieved groups use free social spaces to defend against the assimilative influences of secular education. In earlier periods, Catholic schools developed for this purpose. At present, a key dimension of cultural conflict involves widespread fundamentalist and evangelical Protestant alienation from public schools, which are viewed as alien, hostile institutions steeped in "secular humanism" (Sikkink 1999). In response, some Conservative Protestants have pursued various alternative educational strategies, including home schooling and Christian academies. Although some studies have tended to emphasize the insularity and rigidity of fundamentalist schools (Peshkin 1986, Rose 1988), other accounts point to the selective incorporation of norms and strategies from mainstream education culture (Wagner 1990). For most Conservative Protestants, however, cultural

alienation from the public schools clearly has not led to the abandonment of public education (Sikkink 1999). To the contrary, religious conservatives and Christian Right activists have vigorously contested local school board elections and have pressed debates over curricula and textbooks, censorship, and other policy issues at state and district levels around the country. However, conservative Christians have encouraged their children to avoid secular institutions of higher education. Biblical inerrantist parents and youths apparently heed the warnings of prominent activists, as evidenced by young fundamentalists' significantly lower rates of college attendance and avoidance of college preparatory curricula in high school and the negative effect that inerrantist parents have on young people's postsecondary educational attainment (Darnell & Sherkat 1997, Sherkat & Darnell 1999). Future research should continue to investigate the importance of distinctive cultural communities on the life circumstances and life chances of their members.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORIES AND RELIGION

Just over a decade ago, Wuthnow (1988:500) cogently remarked 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." Today, this statement is less true. The wealth of empirical findings about religious beliefs, commitments, and institutions and their consequences left the field open for new theoretical insights, and the trickle of theoretical perspicacity that began in the late 1970s turned into a flood by the early 1990s. The most notable and contested theoretical developments in the sociology of religion have come from rational choice perspectives (Young 1997). There are two schools of rational choice thought about religion. Supply-side theorists emphasize the importance of constraining and facilitating factors on the collective production of religious value—and assume that underlying preferences for religious goods remain stable. Demand-side theorists highlight shifting preferences and the influence of social constraints on individuals' choices. At the heart of all rational choice perspectives is the market analogy applied to religion, and the following axioms are common to studies in this genre: that religious markets involve exchanges for general supernatural compensators—promises of future rewards and supernatural explanations for life events and meaning (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987). Like other commodities, religious goods are produced, chosen, and consumed. Supernatural compensators and explanations cannot be proven or disproved, so religious goods are risky. Social relationships are the most likely sources of information about religious wares and help reassure consumers of the value of religious goods. Uncertainty about the worth of compensators and explanations lowers their value and increases the likelihood that individuals will diver-

sify religious investments (Iannaccone 1995a, Stark & Bainbridge 1987, Stark 1996b). Religious organizations are firms dedicated to the production of religious value. Congregations are franchises led by entrepreneurial salespeople (ministers), who create value for customers. Firms are limited in their range of product offerings, and only those lacking an organizational hierarchy (e.g. Baptists) or nourishing an institutional commitment to pluralism (e.g. Roman Catholics) can sustain much diversity (Finke & Stark 1992, Iannaccone 1991, Stark 1998).

Religious Human Capital

Iannaccone's (1990) religious human capital theory has been a source of both inspiration and controversy (Bruce 1993, Spickard 1998). According to this theory, religious participation builds individuals' stock of religious capital. Religious capital—in the form of knowledge and familiarity with doctrines, rituals, hymns, and the like—is then used to produce religious value in future religious collective actions. Familiar religious settings facilitate the effective use of religious capital and enhance religious production. Alien religious rituals, understandings, and communities hamstring the collective production of religious value because religious human capital cannot be utilized effectively. Just as experienced cooks are able to produce valuable meals with familiar ingredients, well-capitalized religious congregants are able to generate valuable religious experiences. As in all supply-side theories, preferences are viewed as stable, and only the capacity to produce religious value shifts. Further, the primary constraints on religious production are the levels of human capital possessed by individuals or collectivities. If they so desire, individuals are viewed as free to choose religious options they might desire, and any negative externalities of religious consumption are considered gratuitous costs (Iannaccone 1992, 1994).

Iannaccone (1990) uses this theory to explain a variety of religious phenomena. First, human capital stocks are seen to limit people's ability to switch religious affiliations, and if a switch is made, a similar denomination will be sought—one where previously acquired human capital can be used. Hence, Methodists would tend to switch to similar groups like the Presbyterians or the Baptists, rather than more unfamiliar traditions like the Catholic or Hindu. Young adults are more likely to switch affiliations because they are less invested in their religious commitments. Couples from different religious backgrounds are not as capable of collectively producing religious value; hence they will curtail religious participation. Women are argued to be more productive religious participants than men, owing to their relative specialization in religious tasks. The relative contribution of time and money to religious organizations has also been explained using this general framework (Iannaccone

1997). Stark (1996b) uses human capital theory to help explain the relative attractiveness of Christianity to Jews in the Roman Empire—since Christianity builds on a Jewish foundation, Jews did not have to develop entirely new religious capital stocks. Indeed, new religious movements that spring from familiar religious traditions are much more successful than those that construct entirely novel religious philosophies or that operate in alien environments (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987).

Preferences and Religious Choices

While the human capital approach views prior religious activity as enhancing individuals' abilities to collectively produce religious value, demand-side perspectives argue that prior religious experiences influence people's desires for religious goods. It is important to note that this viewpoint has firm roots in economic theories of endogenously shifting preferences (cf Von Weizsacker 1971, Elster 1983). Usually, religious experiences enhance desires for familiar religious goods, and preferences are said to be adaptive (Sherkat 1997, 1998, Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Familiarity with religious compensators, explanations, and organizations makes those customary beliefs and commitments more valuable—rather than making persons better able to produce value with the religious articles. Preference shifts do not always support the status quo, since individuals might learn alternative preferences when novel information is introduced through social ties or changing life circumstances such as education, cross-cultural contact, geographic mobility, social movement participation, or social mobility. Further, religious seekers often have counteradaptive preferences, rejecting familiar religious goods in favor of novel compensators and explanations (Sherkat 1997).

Sherkat & Wilson (1995) demonstrate that distinctive religious beliefs in adolescence—particularly biblical inerrancy—are predictive of choosing to switch to conservative denominations versus liberal groups or no affiliation. This holds independent of prior levels of religious participation, which also enhances the likelihood of choosing conservative groups over liberal ones and decreases chances of apostasy. Together, these suggest that both human capital and preferences influence religious decision making. Religious socialization from parents and denominations indicates the development of preferences for particular religious goods, and these direct later participatory and affiliation choices (Sherkat 1998, Sherkat & Wilson 1995). The influence of status mobility on religious choices may arise in part from new preferences generated by changing life circumstances—harkening to Weber's notion of differential theodicies across status groups (Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Miller & Hoffman (1995) demonstrate how risk preferences are predictive of religious behavior, and they show that gender differences in risk preferences help explain gender

differences in religiosity. Because religious beliefs and actions involve a risk that one might be wrong, and because there is little to lose by maintaining religious belief, risk averse individuals choose piety rather than chance the eternal consequences of error (Durkin & Greeley 1991, Miller & Hoffman 1995). Recent applications have also linked the dynamic nature of preferences and their guiding role in religious market behavior with structuration theories (Sewell 1992). Religious preferences are seen as schemata that guide religious choices, while religious participation involves interactions with religious resources. Interactions with religious resources usually sustain religious schemata but may result in learning new preferences (Sherkat 1997, 1998). The nexus of rational choice and structuration theories allows an integration of both institutional and individual elements of religious markets as well as a synthetic framework for the incorporation of the effects of family, workplace, education, politics, etc on religion—and of religion on these other realms of social life.

Social Influences on Individual's Religious Choices

Social influences on choices are an important topic of discussion in economic theory, and sociologists have paved the way for such analyses through models of normative constraints (Akerlof 1997, Bernheim 1995, Sen 1993). All choices are embedded within sets of social relations that influence decision-making, and religious choices are particularly prone to such inducements. When social influences drive religious choices, preferences for supernatural compensators and explanations have little bearing on the type or quantity of religious goods chosen. Social influences on choices come from three sources: (a) sympathy—when religious consumption is driven by the desire to make others feel good, (b) example setting—when the motivation for religious action is to show others how they should behave, and (c) rewards or punishments (Sherkat 1997). Sympathy provides an explanation for parental and spousal influences on religious choices—people often attend religious services or choose religious denominations to please their loved ones. Feelings of closeness to parents inhibit the likelihood of apostasy (Sherkat & Wilson 1995). Parents regularly make religious choices to set an example for children, and having children increases rates of religious participation and reduces the chance that an individual will become irreligious (Myers 1996, Stolzenberg et al 1995, Sherkat 1998).

Religious choices are often linked to secular rewards and punishments. Religious groups frequently serve as conduits for a variety of secular privileges (e.g. social support, access to mating markets, daycare, and economic activities), and social ties to coreligionists provide solidary incentives for participation in religious organizations. In contrast, connections to people outside of the

religious group can impose costs that prevent recruitment and hinder commitment, especially when religious choices are considered deviant as with new religious movements (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987). In communities where social ties are consolidated across family, work, friendship networks, neighborhoods, and other social arenas, individuals will be given considerable social rewards or suffer penalties for refusing participation in dominant religious institutions. These nonreligious sanctions limit religious voluntarism. Among African Americans, religious benefits are less predictive of religious participation in the South—especially the rural South—compared to the non-South. In the South, social opportunities for African Americans are limited, save for those provided by the near-monopoly Baptist and Methodists churches. Homogamy norms and residential and occupational segregation consolidate social ties and make some moderate level of religious participation necessary in order to enjoy social status and other social benefits (Ellison 1995, Ellison & Sherkat 1995, Sherkat & Cunningham 1998). A similar pattern is found among Mormons (Phillips 1998), where rates of participation and commitment are higher in the Mormon stronghold of the intermountain West.

Explaining the Church-Sect Cycle

Stark & Bainbridge's (1985, 1987) church-sect cycle provides an important theoretical model for understanding the trajectories of success and decline in religious organizations. Their model emphasizes both supply and demand elements. The definition and classification of religious organizations are pivotal for understanding this perspective. Religious groups vary in their degree of tension with broader society. Churches have little tension with worldly institutions, since they reject exclusive otherworldly explanations. Sects claim to have exclusive access to scarce supernatural compensators—and these claims also put them in a state of tension with the dominant society (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987, Iannaccone 1988). Sects are attractive to less privileged groups because they renounce the importance of worldly gain and pleasure. Since the dispossessed always outnumber the upper classes—and may even recruit them through social ties—sectarian religious groups have broad appeal and grow rapidly when not subject to persecution (Finke & Stark 1992).

Religious organizations and their constituencies are not static, however. Successful sects spawn bureaucratic organizations to oversee movement resources and coordinate tasks vital to their soteriological mission. The professional staffs of these organizations are no longer directly beholden to the constituency of the movement, and these religious elites can begin to impress their own religious desires on the sect. Since religious elites are most likely to be upwardly mobile, they will seek more worldly religious goods. Upwardly mobile members of the sect will also prefer these more worldly religious goods, and contributions from elite members may further spur a shift in the religious

goods produced by the sect. Seminaries and review boards allow religious elites to control the production of religious goods and to enforce product homogeneity by dictating seminary and ministerial appointments and by sanctioning deviants. The end result is a gradual replacement of otherworldly theologies and a salvation oriented mission with more worldly philosophies and a focus on secular concerns (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987, Montgomery 1996, Finke & Stark 1992).

While sects tend to reduce their level of tension and become churches, many members prefer the otherworldly religion of the original sect. Some members will choose to exit the former sect, defecting to groups that maintain a high state of tension and offer exclusive supernatural compensators and explanations. Other congregants may voice opposition to changes, which can result in expulsion or schism, and the formation of a new sect. The Methodists are a classic American example. Beginning in the early nineteenth century as an otherworldly salvation-oriented sect, the Methodists gradually built seminaries, began paying full-time ministers, rejected principles of individual perfectionism, and replaced their soteriological focus with staid systematic theology. As they shifted their religious products, sectarian movements broke off and formed the Free Methodists, and various Holiness sects that sought to bring back the "old time religion" (Finke & Stark 1992). Sometimes those seeking otherworldly compensators find them in new religions—cults. Revivalist sects and/or novel cults fill the market niche for vividly otherworldly supernatural compensators and thereby limit secularization that might otherwise result as churchly movements gain ascendance.

Strictness and Strength

Beginning with Kanter's (1972) work on communal movements, scholars have recognized that groups that make stringent demands on members are more successful, and this success is rooted in the rational actions of members (Hall 1988b). Religious movements are no exception, and recently social scientists have formulated theories that explain the generative functions of strictness in religious movements. Drawing on Kelley's (1972) work on the growth and strength of strict religious groups, Iannaccone (1992, 1994) explains the advantages of strictness by appealing to increases in the collective production of religious value. Strict religious groups weed out unproductive members who free ride on the collective production efforts of more committed members. Iannaccone argues that because strict churches impose sacrifices and stigma on members, free riders shy away, and the more devoted membership generates higher per capita religious benefits. Committed members sacrifice some secular value; however, the faithful are repaid in bountiful religious goods produced in cooperation with equally engaged fellow congregants. The thesis fits nicely with historical research demonstrating the relative success of

exclusive conservative religious groups (Finke & Stark 1992), higher levels of resource mobilization in conservative denominations (Iannaccone et al 1995), and variations in mobilization for Catholic religious orders (Finke 1997). Iannaccone's model also addresses cases where sacrifices or stigma are too high and when adjustments must be made to attain some necessary amount of secular utility (Iannaccone & Miles 1990). Less committed individuals have been shown to switch into less demanding liberal groups, while more active individuals choose strict groups (Sherkat & Wilson 1995)

The "strict church" thesis is both influential and controversial (Chaves 1995, Demerath 1995, Ellison 1995, Iannaccone 1995b, Marwell 1996, Spickard 1998), and criticism had been leveled on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Wallis (1991) points out that freeriding is limited by metapreferences that enhance the value of participation, and "in-process" benefits that can only be enjoyed by hearty participants. Marwell (1996) argues that sacrifice conflates strictness with resource mobilization and hence selects on the dependent variable of organizational strength. Tullock (1996) remarks that free riding is not important because religious goods are private goods like fire insurance. The joint maximization of religious and secular value may also be more feasible than Iannaccone asserts—one can be a devout conservative Protestant, Orthodox Jew, or Mormon and still enjoy all of the material aspects of secular life. This subverts Iannaccone's (1988) model by preventing joint production possibility frontiers from becoming concave.

Preferences for strictures may also be important determinants of religious participation (Sherkat 1997). Indeed, most members of strict religious organizations do not consider it a sacrifice to eschew ties with infidels, or refrain from drunkenness, homosexuality, and non-marital sex—and people may choose religious groups that affirm these preferences. Exclusive meaning systems that provide valued explanations may be the key benefit generated by "strict" groups (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987), and these beliefs are unrelated to collective production, instead resembling private goods. Empirical critiques point out alternative interpretations for the growth and success of religious groups, and the imperfect relationship between strictness and growth. Perin & Mauss (1993) find little in the way of sacrifices or stigma incurred by members of unquestionably strong and growing megachurches. Studies of church growth fail to provide reasonable confirmation that the range of "strict" churches is growing (Smith 1992, Lazerwitz 1995), and many argue that growth and strength are more likely a function of age structure, marketing techniques, geographic location, and birth rates (Roozen & Hadaway 1993).

Pluralism and Religiosity

The effect of religious pluralism on religiosity has been the subject of vigorous debates. Supply-side theorists argue that religious pluralism invigorates relig-

ious market activity, in contradiction to Durkheimian theorists who contend that a unified religion will enhance devotion and bolster religious institutions (Berger 1967). Drawing on Adam Smith, supply-side theorists contend that religious monopolies produce expensive, inferior religious goods (Finke & Stark 1988, 1992, Finke et al 1996, Iannaccone 1991). Diverse religious offerings are needed in a healthy religious market because religious preferences vary across status groups, ethnic origins, class positions, and life experiences (Stark & Bainbridge 1985, 1987). Pluralism is claimed to be the natural state of religious economies, and religious monopolies can only be maintained through state regulation. Separation of church and state ensures that religious institutions compete for the scarce, voluntarily sacrificed, resources of members, rather than being able to extract assets through taxes (Iannaccone 1991). Established churches taking advantage of state subsidies tend to guarantee lifetime employment for clergy (no matter how incompetent), provide parsonages for staff, maintain spectacular physical plants, and the like. Yet, part time ministers and volunteers may better serve local congregations because they share the life experiences of congregants. Competition makes institutions more efficient, and entrepreneurial salespeople vigorously market religious products—tailoring them to the desires of constituents, rather than following the preferences of religious elites (Finke & Stark 1992, Iannaccone 1991).

Considerable evidence from the United States and elsewhere shows the positive effects of pluralism, and negative effects of monopolies and state regulation (Chaves & Cann 1992, Christiano 1987, Finke & Stark 1988, Finke et al 1996, Hamberg & Pettersson 1994, Iannaccone 1991, Olds 1994, Stark & Iannaccone 1994). In the nineteenth century United States, religious pluralism bolstered membership and demand for clergy. In the presence of competition, Catholic churches are more effective in mobilizing high commitment members and are more innovative in their marketing of religious goods (Stark 1998, Stark & McCann 1993). Stark (1997) argues that exposure to the religious free market in the United States explains why first generation German immigrants are relatively irreligious, yet by the third generation they are like other Americans. Further, religious deregulation is linked to the preponderance of new religious movements in Europe (Stark 1993), as well as the flowering of religious groups in the former Soviet Union (Greeley 1994) and Latin America (Gill 1996). However, some scholars have found an inverse relationship between pluralism and church membership in US counties in the early twentieth century and later (Blau et al 1992, 1993, Breault 1989, Land et al 1991, Olson 1998). At issue in this debate are proper analytic methods and units of analysis. The positive effect of pluralism on membership rates requires a control for percent Catholic, and this is highly correlated with the pluralism index. Critics argue that colinearity problems create an artifactual positive effect of pluralism

on membership, and that the positive effect of percent Catholic on adherence rates is inconsistent with the pluralism thesis. Supply siders claim that colinearity is not a significant problem, and that Catholicism maintains internal diversity and its positive effect is consistent with theory (Iannaccone 1991, Finke & Stark 1989, 1992). Second, advocates of the pluralism thesis persuasively argue that cities are the appropriate unit of analysis. Counties are too large and can mask local monopolies—particularly before the advent of automobiles (Finke et al 1996, Finke & Stark 1998). The timing of religious deregulation plays a role in explaining contrasting findings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; recently deregulated religious markets are more likely to respond to increased competition. Further, there are probably limits to the positive effects of diversity—beyond a few competing firms, there may be no additional positive effects of diversity on religious adherence.

CONCLUDING NOTE

The sociological rediscovery of religion comes at a time when other aspects of culture are also seeing renewed interest. The teleologies of Marxist and structural functionalist theories that drove cultural factors to the periphery of the discipline have become less salient in the diverse global setting of modern sociology. The theoretical infrastructure for studying religious markets has developed rapidly since the mid-1980s. What is clearly lacking are rigorous attempts to provide a theoretical and empirical link across levels of analysis. Future studies need to (a) disentangle the relative effects of preference shifts versus household productivity, (b) discern when religious value is collectively produced vs when it is a private good with intrinsic value, (c) specify the sources and magnitude of social influences on choices, (d) examine the influence of organizational processes on market dynamics (e.g. the effect of denominational conflict and organizational strength on individuals' choices and aggregate offerings), and, (e) model aggregate markets in a way that takes into account existing preference/human capital structures and organizational factors. Advances in multilevel modeling make such investigations possible; however, data gaps and operationalization problems limit what can be done at present. In a similar vein, investigations of religious beliefs and commitments and their influences have been hamstrung by a dearth of high quality, nationally representative panel data. Many data collection efforts neglect religious factors entirely, others only include coarse measures of religious identification and/or single items on religious participation at one point in time. These data gaps create serious problems for research in the sociology of religion, especially when research questions focus on racial and ethnic or religious subgroups with distinctive qualities.

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