

A Cultural Sociology of Religion: New Directions

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Abstract

In this article, I review three contemporary streams of scholarship that are revitalizing the cultural analysis of religion, an approach that dates to the discipline's founding. Research from an institutional field perspective focuses on the institutions that shape religious belief, practice, and mobilization. Work on lived religion, including neo-Durkheimian approaches, focuses on religious experience and contested practices of sacralization. Scholarship on religious cultural tools and symbolic boundaries analyzes religion as symbolic legitimation. These three approaches avoid serious problems associated with both market and secularization accounts, in part because of the way they conceptualize religious authority and religious identity, and in part because of their broader scope of inquiry. In the conclusion, I combine the insights from these approaches to articulate a promising agenda for future research, offering a set of focus questions that are relevant to both classical and contemporary concerns about religion's role in modern societies.

WHY NEW DIRECTIONS?

The sociological study of religion is being reshaped by a promising new body of work that takes a cultural approach, work that is renewing a long-standing emphasis on meaning, identification, and moral order in the sociological study of religion. This essay reviews that work, classifying it into three themes according to its major theoretical influences and empirical foci: (a) work analyzing the institutional fields that shape religious belief, practice, and mobilization; (b) work analyzing lived religion, including neo-Durkheimian approaches, which is centrally concerned with religious experience and contested processes of sacralization; and (c) work analyzing religious cultural tools and symbolic boundaries, which views religion as a source of symbolic legitimation. All three streams of research and theoretical development draw on, and extend in important ways, previous cultural analyses of religion. Taken as a whole, this newer work is revitalizing the sociology of religion and connecting it more centrally to the discipline.

The renewed emphasis on cultural analysis stems in part from dissatisfaction with market and secularization approaches to religion, and with the debate between them, a debate that has had a formative influence on recent scholarship in ways that are proving unhelpful for explaining important contemporary developments. Contrary to market theories, the posited relationship between religious pluralism and participation has not stood up to empirical scrutiny (Chaves & Gorski 2001), and the late twentieth century has witnessed a decline in religiosity in Western Europe and, more recently, a generational decline in the scope of religious involvement in the United States (Wuthnow 2007). There is a growing need to understand spirituality (Roof et al. 1999), a phenomenon that market and secularization theories tend to ignore or treat in a pejorative way. And outside of certain Western nations, there has been a global religious revival of historic proportions over the past 30 years or so that seriously challenges secularization frameworks (Gorski & Altinordu 2008).

Moreover, there are other urgent questions beyond those involving religious growth or decline. Across the globe, religion has an important influence on national and local politics, policy making, social movement mobilization and framing, and public discourse. Transnational flows of people and information are making it difficult to contain an analysis of religion solely within national contexts (Levitt 2007). There is an urgent need to rethink the relationship between religion, state, and society in ways that make sense for today, especially for Islamic countries (Gorski & Altinordu 2008); to investigate the forms of moral community and moral order embraced by the growing numbers of nonreligious persons in the West (Baker & Smith 2009); and to develop new understandings about the intersection of religious and other forms of identification.

I argue that it is possible to combine the insights from the newer cultural approaches to the study of religion to set a promising agenda for future research that is relevant to both classic and contemporary questions, while also avoiding problems associated with market and secularization approaches to religion. Below, I review these new cultural approaches, and, in the conclusion, I provide a series of focus questions that draw on the best insights generated by this newer work to articulate an emerging agenda for research.

“ARE WE SECULAR YET?”—CRITIQUES OF A DOMINANT DEBATE

Secularization theory was inextricably intertwined with sociology’s founding metanarrative of modernization (Evans & Evans 2008, Smith 2003). It remained the dominant sociological framework for understanding religion until the late twentieth century, when a worldwide religious revival and important episodes of religious politicization across the globe caused many to reject secularization theory outright, while others reworked the theory around a more modest, limited, and specific set of claims (Casanova 1994, Chaves 1994; for an extensive review, see Gorski & Altinordu 2008).

However, a few scholars still support a stronger version of secularization theory (Bruce 2002, Norris & Inglehart 2004), and sociologists outside of the subfield often treat secularization as a simple fact, part of the very definition of modernization. This shows just how deeply founding metaphors of disenchantment have shaped our discipline's taken-for-granted understanding of the nature of modern societies (Reed & Adams 2011). The disenchantment perspective is entrenched and persists despite being challenged by those who argue it mischaracterizes non-Western trajectories and obscures important aspects of Western societies as well (Asad 2003, Eisenstadt 2002, Gorski & Altinordu 2008, Smith 2003).

Market theory, in all its major variants, explicitly challenges secularization theory's core argument that religion is a poor fit in the modern world. Market theorists argue that modernity creates the conditions that foster religious privatization, pluralism, and voluntarism, causing religion to thrive—and, ironically, to retain much of its public significance (Regnerus & Smith 1998, Sherkat & Ellison 1999, Smith 1998, Stark & Finke 2000, Warner 1993). Market approaches vary, ranging from the religious economies model (REM), which draws on a rational choice framework (Stark & Finke 2000), to accounts that use “the market” as a metaphor for the choice and voluntarism of the American religious field (Warner 1993) or the capacity of religious subcultures to anchor identity in late modern contexts (Smith 1998).

There is a growing awareness that market theories suffer from serious problems. The REM (Stark & Finke 2000), in particular, has been critiqued for its inability to account for the social embeddedness of religious choices (Edgell 2005, Ellison 1995, Young 1997) and the cultural construction of rationality (Smilde 2007), for mistakes in assessing foundational empirical claims about the relationship between religious pluralism and religious adherence (Chaves & Gorski 2001, Voas et al. 2002), for its lack of attention to relations of power in the supply side of religion (Bush 2010, Wilde et al. 2010), for an unwarranted assumption that

religious identification or belief has a strong and unitary effect on social action (Chaves 2010, Smilde & May 2010), and for a definition of religious strength that uncritically mirrors historically specific features of contemporary Protestant Christian orthodoxy (Bruce 1999, Cadge et al. 2011, Edgell 2005).

The debate between proponents of secularization and market frameworks has received a great deal of attention, and so it is easy to overlook what these opposed approaches have in common. With the neo-Weberian orientation of both frameworks, the major problematic is the fate of mainstream religious institutions and authorities in the modern(izing) world. Their research agendas privilege identification of the conditions under which these mainstream religious institutions decline or thrive in late modern societies. Are we secular yet? Will we become so, and if so, when, how, and with what consequences? The preoccupation with this set of questions—always present in the sociological study of religion and made even more prominent by recent debates between market and secularization theorists—explains three features of current scholarship in the subfield that have recently been subject to critique.

First, the sociology of religion has developed a disproportionate focus on empirical studies of American Protestantism, especially White evangelicalism, to the relative neglect of non-Western, Catholic, and non-Christian religious experiences and practices (Bruce 1999, Cadge et al. 2011, Poulson & Campbell 2010). Whether traditional religious institutions and authorities can compel compliance and grow in membership under conditions of late modernity has been a central question for both market and secularization approaches. White American evangelicalism has done both in an era when other religious institutions saw decline, making it the most interesting case for both sides of the debate.

Second, the subfield has almost completely neglected religion's role as a source of conflict, division, and inequality in favor of an emphasis on its positive and prosocial aspects (Cadge et al. 2011, Gorski & Altinordu 2008,

Hartmann et al. 2011, Poulson & Campbell 2010, Smilde & May 2010). This neglect stems from an understanding of religion as a voluntary or chosen ground of meaning and identity that, by definition, provides protection from the corrosive, anomic aspects of late modern society.

Third, scholars have often taken for granted that religious identification or belief has a strong and unitary effect on social action (for example, treating it as an independent variable that has a straightforward causal effect that works the same way across any given sample of persons) (Chaves 2010, Smilde & May 2010). This presumption flows from a neo-Weberian focus on strongly bounded, coherent religious groups with unitary leadership and from a theoretical understanding of religious authority as cognitive assent to religious doctrine.

CULTURAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Cultural approaches to the sociological study of religion, which date to the discipline's founding, focus on a wider range of religious expression and explore a different set of questions about the nature and sociological significance of religion. Durkheim (2001 [1912]) analyzed the shared, sacred symbols that underpin the moral order of groups and societies, and Weber (1998 [1905]) explored the role of religious ideas in history. In the post-World War II era, sociologists revived this classical focus on religion, and an influential body of cultural analyses emerged. Especially important was work by Mary Douglas and Peter Berger, among others, which focused renewed attention on the sacred (for reviews, see Wuthnow et al. 1984, Wuthnow & Witten 1988). In the 1980s, Bellah and his students (1985, 1991) began to analyze the diverse discursive traditions at play in the contested processes of claims making in civil society, opening the door to an understanding of moral orders as plural and permeated by relations of power and emphasizing religion's role in political legitimation.

Another strong body of work emphasized the link between religion and collective

identity. In the early 1990s, Warner (1993) published an important review of this research in an article that also proposed an analytical framework for understanding American religion, outlining the voluntaristic and expressive features of mainstream religious institutions that make them adaptive in the context of late modernity. Five years later, Smith (1998) published an influential theoretical statement in the context of an empirical study of American evangelicalism, which directed attention away from overarching society-wide religious symbol systems and toward the importance of religious subcultures as loci of identification, meaning making, and political engagement.

The agenda-setting cultural analyses by Warner and Smith were framed by the authors as extensions of the market paradigm. Both included explicit critiques of secularization theory and articulated why religion thrives in late modern societies. Together, these works helped to solidify an emerging emphasis on the study of contemporary, thriving religious subcultures (e.g., American evangelicalism, certain immigrant groups); directed attention to the positive and prosocial aspects of religion as an expressive and voluntary ground of identity; and treated strong religious subcultures and institutions as having relatively unitary and straightforward effects on members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Contemporary cultural approaches to the study of religion are varied and variously oriented to previous work in the field. Some contemporary research is strongly shaped by the work of Bellah's students or by the approaches of Warner and Smith. In many cases, the work reviewed below adopts some elements of earlier approaches (for example, focusing on religious subcultures and boundaries, or religion and ethnic identity) while reacting against other aspects of earlier work now perceived as problematic. Other research is more directly informed by the recent cultural turn in sociology that dates to the 1990s (Bonnell & Hunt 1999) and draws on a more diverse array of theoretical underpinnings; much of it is not primarily oriented to the sociology of religion as a subfield. What

unites contemporary cultural approaches is a focus on a broader range of religious expression, a decentering of the metanarrative of religion's fate in the modern world, and an orientation to religious authority and identity that emphasizes contestation and fluidity.

Religion as an Institutional Field of Activity

A large body of research conceptualizes religion as an organized field of activity. This work is cultural in several important ways: It highlights normative and nonrational pressures on elites and organizations in a field; it shows how larger cultural logics become embedded in routine practices and organizational forms in ways that affect both elite and nonelite field participants; it provides a language for analyzing the contested production of official doctrine and other forms of field-specific knowledge; and it posits institutional fields as a primary locus for creating cultural coherence in the broader society (Bourdieu 1977, Cerulo 2002, DiMaggio 1997, DiMaggio & Powell 1991, Friedland & Alford 1991, Meyer & Rowan 1977).

For Bourdieu (1977), a field is composed of elites who constitute an interpretive community and whose positions are sustained by credentials and the institutions that marshal and distribute resources. Drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of a field, some scholars view religion as a field in which elites engage in symbolic struggles to define historically specific versions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Bourdieu 1977, Kurtz 1986, Swartz 1996, Verter 2003). Others analyze how religious fields foster routine forms of practice that socialize both children and adults in a way that shapes the moral habitus (MacGregor 2008, Winchester 2008); this work unites an attention to institutional fields with a focus on lived religious experience. Although Bourdieuan approaches have generated relatively few empirical studies, they are promising for their capacity to recenter questions of power and conflict in a literature dominated by a focus on religion as a ground of consensual cultural expression

and by assumptions that religious choices are unconstrained.

The largest body of scholarship taking a field approach is grounded in neoinstitutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell 1991); in such work, the religious field is defined by a set of dominant organizational forms, core tasks, and routine ways of doing things that are valued for their own sake (normative) and by regulatory structures (including legal ones), all of which provide cultural coherence (Cerulo 2002, DiMaggio 1997). Cultural sociologists have argued for an institutional approach to religion while focusing on a range of cases and problems, from understanding American mainstream religion (Becker 1999, Wuthnow 1988) to global religious organizations (Wilde 2007, Wilde et al. 2010) to nationalism (Friedland 2001).

The largest body of empirical studies concentrates on mainstream American religion, identifying the field's core features: the dominant organizational form, a particular style of local commitment, and elite divisions. During the twentieth century, local congregations increasingly became the core organizational form (Chaves 2004, Warner 1993); most adherents affiliated with congregations within broad religious traditions or denominational families, such as mainline Protestantism or the Black Church, which still meaningfully capture differences in theology, history, and culture (Steensland et al. 2000). Mainstream American religious institutions encourage and depend upon a style of commitment that is locally oriented, congregationally based, and characterized by individualism, pragmatism, and moralism (Ammerman 1997, Madsen 2009, Roof 1999, Smith 2009). This tempers ideological extremes and reduces the emphasis on doctrinal coherence, while encouraging a limited eclecticism in belief and practice and fostering a therapeutic orientation to religious faith. Local congregations all engage in the core tasks of worship and religious education (religious reproduction) and vary in the degree to which they facilitate civic engagement, social activism, and the fostering of close-knit, caring networks of support (Becker 1999).

The pragmatism of local religious communities is counterposed by the role that religious elites play in providing coherent, religiously based rationales for political and social action, which shape both civic participation and political mobilization (Lindsay 2008, Wuthnow & Evans 2002). Over the twentieth century, these rationales became increasingly polarized. Most scholars agree that the culture wars argument is not a good characterization of the attitudes of the majority of Americans on most issues (DiMaggio et al. 1996, Greeley & Hout 2006), even controversial ones (Evans 2010, Ginsburg 1989, Massengill 2008). Nevertheless, the twentieth century saw a fundamental restructuring of the religious field around a major left/right cleavage that runs through, not between, denominational families, perpetuated in large part by elites, activist networks, and the growing number of parachurch organizations active across a range of issue areas and institutional domains (Bellah et al. 1991, Hunter 1991, Wuthnow 1988).

Scholars working within the institutional approach have been concerned not only with characterizing the American religious field, but also with explaining the major effects that the religious field has on American society. A large literature, including studies within the influential social capital approach, documents the importance of the religious field for generating civic engagement and fostering volunteering. Social capital approaches often focus on individual networks and are not attuned to the normative and supra-individual features of the religious field (e.g., see Putnam & Campbell 2010). But recently, more critical voices have emerged, which draw explicitly on cultural and institutional arguments to highlight how religious social capital may enforce exclusionary social boundaries that exacerbate inequality, undermine a broader collective identity, or weaken the links between religious identity and civic engagement (Agadjanian & Menjivar 2008; Barnes 2005; Beyerlein & Hipp 2005, 2006; Blanchard 2007; Brown & Brown 2003; Fitzgerald & Spohn 2005; Peek et al. 1991).

The relationship between religion and ethnic identity in the American context is a vital area of inquiry that has seen a reorientation in recent years (for a review, see Cadge & Ecklund 2007). Warner (1993) argued that religion in the United States is constitutively pluralistic, providing a major locus for the maintenance of ethnic culture and identity while also aiding in immigrant adaptation (e.g., see Mooney 2009). Recently, Warner's thesis has been critiqued for not encompassing the variety of religious organizations and experience within new immigrant communities and for ignoring issues of power and loss as non-Christian and non-Western groups assimilate to an essentially Protestant religious form (the congregation) (Bender & Klassen 2010, Cadge 2008, Kurien 2006, Williams 2007).

As a whole, the field approach has been influenced by market approaches (especially Warner 1993); it has retained the neo-Weberian focus on mainstream religious groups, institutions, and elites and has concentrated largely on the United States. However, a field approach does not logically require a market metaphor. Edgell (2005, see chapter 2) articulates a field approach that combines elements of neoinstitutionalism with a Bourdieuan emphasis on the politics of orthodoxy in order to provide a language for conceptualizing change in religious fields that does not reference or depend upon a market metaphor or a focus on secularization. A field approach is also compatible with examining how religion intersects with other fields and institutions, including those that facilitate alternative religious expressions (Bader et al. 2010, Bender 2010, Draper & Baker 2011).

Wilde's (2007, Wilde et al. 2010) analysis of the conflict leading up to the Vatican II reforms shows the power of the field approach in broadening the focus of inquiry beyond Protestantism in the United States. She shows how religious elites, responding to the concerns of their specific national contexts and to institutionalized constraints and rewards of their positions in the hierarchy, changed the constitutive rules governing religious practice in an institution operating on a global scale

(Wilde 2007, Wilde et al. 2010). Others use the field approach to understand religion's role in global civil society (Bush 2007), the historical emergence of activist networks in the context of empire formation (Stamatov 2010), or the intersection of religious and other elites on a national or global scale (Lindsay 2010).

A good empirical example of the differences between a field-based and a market-based approach can be found in comparing Wuthnow's (2007) *After the Baby Boomers* with market-based treatments of generational changes in religious involvement, which tend to emphasize generational shifts in values (see Smith 2009). In contrast, Wuthnow argues that the decline in religious adherence among younger Americans (roughly, those under the age of 35) can be understood as the result of a short-term, historically specific failure of institutional adaptation. Religious institutions still, by and large, focus on providing ministries oriented to a life course trajectory that includes achieving all the major markers of adult status by one's midtwenties (completion of education, establishment of an independent household, marriage, stable employment for at least one spouse, and children) (cf. Edgell 2005). But the life course has undergone a radical transition over the past 30 years; now, most Americans take until their midthirties to achieve all five markers of adulthood, and many never do, remaining childless and spending long periods of adult life without a spouse/partner. Given this reconfigured life course, Wuthnow argues that American religious institutions have failed to provide ministries that are relevant for the first 10–15 years of adult life.

Wuthnow's analysis reflects the strengths of the field approach. It is empirically anchored and does not invoke secularization as a master process to explain changes in religious institutions or in individual religious involvement. And rather than locating religious disaffection in generational changes in individual attitudes, Wuthnow offers a nuanced discussion of institutional fit, given how economic transformations have fundamentally reshaped the transition to adulthood.

Lived Religion and Sacralization

The lived religion approach crosses disciplines and is marked by an attention to religious practice and experience in everyday life across many arenas of activity. Scholars working in this tradition begin with the religious person, and they de-emphasize the cognitive and doctrinal (belief-centered) approaches to religion favored by secularization and market accounts. Rather, they emphasize emotion and embodied practice, along with the narratives through which people make sense of their religious activity (Neitz et al. 2010). Lived religion is a practical, everyday activity oriented toward interacting with superhuman others (Riesebrodt 2009), drawing on sacred sources of power (McGuire 2008), generating experiences of transcendence and meaning (Orsi 2005), or some combination of these goals (Hall 1997).

Studies of lived religion examine a wide range of religious expression. Although some scholars focus on mainstream religious communities and institutions as contexts for lived religion (Ammerman 1987, Cadge 2004, Nelson 2005), there is also a sustained focus on how individuals create and experience religion in different contexts including those not traditionally religious (Cadge & Daglian 2008, Ignatow 2009, Jennings et al. 2010, McGuire 1988) and inquiry into how folk beliefs may cross the boundaries between mainstream religion and other arenas of activity (Draper & Baker 2011).

Particularly important are recent influential studies of spirituality, magic, and other alternative religious practices. Bender (2010) creates a finely observed ethnography of contemporary transcendentalists and mystics in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, studying spirituality and religious experience as phenomena produced within an array of institutional fields and entangled with everyday life. Research on magic and pagan rituals (Berger 2007, Pike 2001), along with the new research on experiences of the occult and paranormal (Bader et al. 2010, Schofield Clark 2003), also makes it clear that, for a large percentage of the American

population, such expressions are common, can easily overlap with traditional religious activity, and are oriented toward the same basic core tasks of explanation and meaning making associated with more traditional religious communities (Friedland & Alford 1991).

A small but important body of recent work develops a neo-Durkheimian approach to the study of lived religion by turning studies of the sacred toward everyday religious practices. For example, Taves (2009) argues that sacralization processes do not spring organically from experiences of awe, and that which is sacralized is not an idealized collective representation of society. Rather, the designation of things as sacred is part of a larger set of social practices—practices of setting things apart and deeming them special, which allow the cognitive ordering and coherence making that individuals engage in on a daily basis (cf. Marshall 2010).

This newer understanding of sacralization as contested social practice provides an incipient framework for comparing religious and other “special” things, like the family (Krumrei et al. 2009, Mahoney 2010) or the nation (Friedland 2001), and for understanding how secular forms of practice may come to have a sacralized meaning for participants (Jennings et al. 2010). It is also useful to sociologists who study religion and violence. For example, in his sweeping historical comparison of apocalyptic movements, Hall (2009) argues that confrontations between the religious and the secular have been transformed, under conditions of modernity, into a wide-ranging set of confrontations between the profane and the sacred that are related to religion in a variety of ways.

Riesebrodt (2009) argues that religion as a practical activity is related to religious institutions and religious experience but is not coterminous with either; he privileges the analysis of the intersection of religious practice with particular religious (and other) institutional fields and the historically specific forms of religious experience that result. Riesebrodt’s practice-oriented approach to lived religion lends itself to analyzing how institutional fields provide the resources (e.g., organizational infrastructure)

as well as the cultural coherence (e.g., norms and doctrines) that support specific forms of lived religious practice—and make others more costly or difficult to pursue.

If Riesebrodt calls theoretical attention to the relationship between lived religion and institutional fields, recent empirical scholarship has begun to delineate how this works in particular cases. For example, Winchester’s (2008) study of converts to Islam in a midwestern Islamic cultural center draws on Bourdieu to conceptualize religious conversion as a process of reorienting the habitus through practices that reshape embodied dispositions. Conversion is a form of embodied becoming that is embedded within the routine of Islamic religious practices (cf. Tavory & Winchester 2012). These institutionally embedded practices are formative of religious subjectivity and cannot be adequately understood as a mere index of cognitive beliefs to which one rationally assents. Winchester’s analysis usefully expands the concept of habitus by analyzing changes during adulthood and by drawing attention to religion, gender, race, and other aspects of social location that may be as important as social class in habitus formation.

Smilde (2007) also studies conversion but takes a different approach. He develops an important theoretical statement through his ethnographic account of men’s experiences of conversion to Pentecostal religious forms in some of the poorest areas of Caracas, Venezuela. Smilde coins the term “imaginative rationality” to capture how individuals approach lived experiences with innovative responses that imagine a desired future and orient action to realize it. Smilde argues that conversion narratives evolve over time, engage with larger Latin American narratives of suffering due to colonialism and internal corruption and poverty, and draw on both spiritual and material metaphors to orient action, without being instrumentally rational.

This work on conversion helps us to understand how religious culture is institutionally embedded because, although conversion may be a general process that the analyst can identify in the abstract, it is religious institutions

that produce the routine forms of practice that lead to specific formations of the habitus and specific kinds of imaginative rationality. And although it is undoubtedly the case that religious fields are central in the production of religious culture, they are not the only fields that facilitate religious experience or lived religion. Bender's (2010) study of those who engage in alternative spiritual practices in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, shows how several different fields—holistic health/alternative medicine, arts organizations, and mainstream religious congregations—provide meeting spaces, leadership, and other resources that facilitate spiritual practices and lived religious experience (cf. McGuire 1988). From a practice-based perspective, a core task for the sociological study of religion is analyzing the empirical variation in practices oriented to sacralization, the institutions (religious and other) that facilitate such practices, and the resulting religious experiences and moral orders that emerge in specific times and places.

Moreover, research at the intersection of lived religion and institutional analysis helps us to get past the idea that the analyst must choose between understanding religion as operating on the surface (as tools that people use to solve problems or position themselves strategically) or as being deep (formative of preconscious or automatic habits and dispositions). Smilde (2007) and Winchester (2008), using different theoretical perspectives but the same careful ethnographic method, show that religious institutions produce cultural repertoires that may be employed strategically as tools to solve problems, but that may also influence individuals in deep ways by providing cultural models that inform initial, rapid, automatic forms of cognition, including the making of moral distinctions (cf. Lamont et al. 1996, Wuthnow & Witten 1988).

Vaisey's (2009) empirical analysis of data from the National Study of Youth and Religion provides additional support for this approach. He shows how four historically important, different discursive streams in the United States (see Bellah et al. 1985), some of which

are produced within religious institutions, provide scripts that influence youths' choices and behaviors in automatic ways that they cannot articulate. Vaisey's (2009) work is valuable in providing quantitative empirical evidence for the effect of deep religious cultural schemas on social action—although his conclusion is problematic in conceiving of cultural schema approaches and talk-centered approaches as an either/or dichotomy (see Lizardo & Strand 2010, Steensland 2009, Tavory & Winchester 2012).

Symbolic Boundaries and Cultural Tools

The empirical studies and theoretical statements profiled thus far are oriented to classic questions in the sociology of religion. In contrast, much of the work on how religion shapes symbolic boundaries and provides cultural tools is oriented to a different set of literatures and debates. Work on religion and boundaries is concerned with how religion justifies, legitimates, or reinforces social boundaries that sharpen relations of inequality (Pachucki et al. 2007). Research on cultural tools examines how individuals use religious ideas, symbols, and metaphors in ways that can have both intended and unintended consequences—including consequences for boundary-making or boundary-blurring processes (Swidler 2001).

One body of work analyzes the boundaries within religious institutions that create social distinctions and relations of power, for example, documenting problems of interaction across social class differences (Lichterman 2005) or showing how religious communities create ideal—and stigmatized—family forms and expressions of gender and sexuality (Bartkowski 2004, Ebaugh & Chafetz 1999, Edgell 2005, Edgell & Docka 2007, Gallagher 2003, Houseknecht & Pankhurst 2000, McQueeney 2009, Moon 2004, Read 2004, Smilde 1997, Wilcox 2004). Other work concentrates on how religion becomes defined as something distinct from other institutions or realms of activity (Ecklund 2010, McRoberts 2003, Sahlins 1976), or how secular arenas

become sacralized when religious elites work to provide interpretive frameworks that challenge the authority of secular elites (Jenkins 2007, Smith 1998).

Research on how religion provides frames for understanding racial identity is significant because it recognizes local religious communities as expressive arenas for the creation of culture through small group interaction while eschewing assumptions that such processes are consensual or unaffected by structural relations of power (Becker 1998, Lee 2010, Marti 2005, Park & Ecklund 2007). A recent review of a large literature on racial boundaries within religious communities (Marti 2009) finds both dynamics of racial/ethnic transcendence and the reinforcement of particular racial and ethnic identities within local religious communities.

Religious tools can reinforce racial and ethnic boundaries in the larger society as well. Emerson & Smith (2000) argue that the White evangelical subculture in the American context provides racially neutral cultural tools—for example, an emphasis on freewill individualism—that nevertheless promote strong racial boundaries and justify racial inequality (see also Christerson et al. 2005). Some argue that the cultural tools of evangelicalism are not racially neutral but racially blind, promoting a systematic misrecognition of White privilege (Edwards 2008a,b; Tranby & Hartmann 2008). Others argue that structural location influences the effect of religious cultural tools on understandings of African American inequality and preferences for ameliorative strategies (Edgell & Tranby 2007) or identify groups for whom religious and other cultural tools are woven together to justify an explicit belief in White supremacy (Adams & Roscigno 2005).

A boundaries approach directs our attention away from the positive aspects of religion as a ground of solidarity and encourages analysis of the simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion that is at the heart of the boundary-making process. For example, research on attitudes toward atheists reveals the centrality of religiosity in Americans' imagination of collective identity, an image that rests upon a common creed

underpinning private and public virtue that makes religiosity a crucial dimension of authentic citizenship (Edgell et al. 2006, Edgell & Tranby 2010). Religion serves as a ground of identity and solidarity in both private and public life in the United States in ways that have for the most part led to increasing tolerance of religious diversity (Fischer & Hout 2006), while at the same time reinforcing the boundary against those who explicitly reject religion and against some religious outsiders (cf. Bail 2008, Edgell & Tranby 2010).

Likewise, contemporary research on religion and nationalism treats religious symbols as malleable, interpreted within particular historical contexts, and shaped by the rules of particular discursive arenas (Burns 1996, Kurien 2004, Moaddel 2005, Zubrzycki 2006). Religion can reinforce either an ethnic or a civic understanding of the nation while, at the same time, excluding certain religious and ethnic others. Religiously based models of the family provide the metaphors through which individuals imagine their relationship to the political and economic order (Friedland 2001, Lakoff 1996); women's bodies can become the loci for historically specific intersections of the sacred or cosmic order with the gender order, the sexual order, and the economic and political order (Reed 2009, Yount 2004). Sometimes this leads women to forms of civic involvement or political mobilization, though they are often placed in a contradictory and ambiguous position vis-à-vis the state (Jafar 2007, Rinaldo 2008).

Although there is a large literature on religious social movements that is beyond the scope of this review, a few treatments stand out for bringing to the forefront the use of cultural tools in shaping mobilization and activist identities (Massengill 2008, Mika 2006, Mirola 2003, Smith 1996, Stamatov 2010, Wood 2002). Of particular importance is research that concentrates on the power of social context to shape the relationship between religion and political action (Nepstad 2004) or religion and violence (Juergensmeyer 2003, Robison et al. 2006). Such an approach deessentializes religious identity by showing the

contested processes of religious boundary making (Allen 2010), and in so doing it can play a role in debunking stereotypes of unfamiliar or nondominant religious groups.

An important example of the work on religion and symbolic legitimation is Evans's (2010) research on the use of religious cultural tools by ordinary Americans to grapple with recent advances in reproductive genetic technologies. Previous research on religious fields and elites had led to an emphasis on a culture wars left/right division. But Evans shows that although religious citizens sometimes draw on the culturally coherent packages of meaning developed by elites (such as discourses designed to mobilize on the issue of abortion), they also draw on a broader range of religious cultural tools—for example, an understanding of meaningful suffering—that lead to areas of convergence and commonality across liberal/conservative lines.

Not all the scholars identified here would understand themselves as working within a single approach or oriented to the same debates, but, taken as a whole, the research on symbolic boundaries and cultural tools has two main strengths. First, it provides a way to think about religion as a source of cultural power—the power to categorize, to assign worth, to define objectives and rationales for action (Tilly 2006), and to make claims on resources in a way that elides or hides relations of interest (Williams & Demerath 1991). Second, the work on religion and boundaries treats religious identity as something that can intersect with other identities without making this intersection relevant only as a means of adjudicating the merits of the secularization thesis. Religious identity and mobilization are treated as contingent and contextual, and the link between religion and social action is subject to the interpretation of both elite and nonelite religious agents, rather than being viewed as automatic or essential.

AN EMERGING AGENDA FOR RESEARCH ON RELIGION

One of the primary purposes of this review is to bring into dialogue different strands of

scholarship and begin to show how they may be usefully integrated to develop a flexible and powerful approach to analyzing religion in society. Broadly speaking, this approach should emphasize (a) the importance of identifying the institutional fields that foster religious and spiritual expression in any given historical context, (b) a practice-oriented and contextual approach to religious identity and experience that recognizes their social embeddedness, and (c) a focus on how religious repertoires shape social relations of power and inequality through the provision of discourses and symbols, which may be employed strategically, and cultural models and metaphors, which shape automatic forms of cognition.

This integration requires the development of a different set of orienting questions that span social contexts and levels of analysis and that avoid some of the problems associated with market and secularization approaches. I propose a limited set of focus questions that begin to articulate an emerging agenda for empirical study:

Focus Questions

1. What organized fields of activity foster religious and spiritual expression in any given social context?
 - a. How do religious fields limit and shape identity formation, religious experience, and practices oriented to the sacred?
 - b. What other, nonreligious fields of activity facilitate religious or spiritual practices and identity formation?
 - c. What are the connections, in specific social contexts, between mainstream religion, spirituality, and alternative religious expressions?
 - d. How do sacralization and secularization processes work in particular social contexts?
2. What kinds of coherence do religious fields, religious leaders, and religious culture provide for the larger society?

- a. How do religious discourses, models, and metaphors come to shape social boundaries, reinforce relationships of inequality, legitimate specific stances in cultural or policy conflicts, and shape automatic cognition and cultural classification?
- b. How do religious elites influence policy across arenas and mobilize individuals for social movements?
- c. What is the relationship between sacralization processes and the moral order of groups, communities, and nations?

These focus questions are not embedded within a problematic understanding of modernity as inherently and necessarily hostile to religion, and they do not inherently privilege White, Western Christianity as exemplary of (strong, vital) religion. They make central a concern with contestation and power as they operate within religious fields, in the lives of individuals, and in society as a whole. And they emphasize the importance of social context in shaping religious identity and the effects of religion on individual action.

To be fruitful, this emerging research agenda must proceed with a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of religious authority and religious identity in the late modern world than the one articulated by market- and secularization-dominant approaches. The work outlined above suggests that religious authority in late modern contexts should be understood as the inherently contested process of providing cultural coherence. Coherence can emerge as the result of elite contests for power in religious fields, but it can also result from the taken-for-granted institutional routines of religious life or from the diffusion of religious metaphors and cultural schema into the broader society. This view of religious authority implies that religious doctrines may not have a unitary effect on individuals' actions. But such doctrines are not irrelevant either; rather, their relevance is contextual.

Thinking of religious authority as the contested provision of cultural coherence directs

attention to socially and historically situated processes rather than to transhistorical trends, fostering analyses of religious change that do not automatically orient to the secularization debate. For example, a focus on contested processes of creating and defending religious coherence can help to explain the political influence of the religious right in the United States and the influence of Islam in other parts of the world without the necessity of adjudicating the long-term transhistorical fate of particular religious groups or traditions. From such a perspective, the question of religious winners and losers is still important—but it is recast to encourage a different kind of empirical focus. Instead of asking, “Which religious groups thrive?” the analyst asks, “Which religious repertoires thrive and expand?”; “Which religious cultural tools (metaphors, schemas, discourses) provide coherence to individual religious experience, to collective identities, and to other arenas of social activity?”; and “What are the limits to coherence and the failed instances of coherence projects?”

Cultural approaches also call for us to recast our understanding of religious identity, emphasizing that such identity is always inherently fluid and intersectional, with boundaries that are actively made and defended (or blurred and changed). The relative boundedness of religious identities can vary across and within contexts, and the boundary-making process is a locus for simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. At the individual level, the meaning of religious identities may vary a great deal, and religion's influence on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and actions may also vary across time or social location. This more fluid and contextual approach to religious identity goes a long way toward addressing concerns raised in the critiques outlined at the beginning of this review.

Since the founding of sociology as a discipline, cultural approaches have been influential in shaping our understanding of the nature of religion and religion's role in society. Recently, the debate between secularization and market theorists inspired important statements by cultural sociologists who drew on a market

metaphor to theorize the causes of religious vitality in the late modern world, launching a wave of empirical studies. But there has been a growing awareness of the problems that result from orienting sociological inquiry about religion to the limited set of cases and questions privileged in the debate between secularization and market theorists. Newer cultural approaches have the potential to reorient research in a way that avoids these problems, while still addressing questions about the

nature and scope of religious authority and analyzing how religion shapes individual behavior and identity. As has historically been the case, cultural approaches provide powerful tools to understand religion's role in our ever-changing world. This review has sought to highlight three promising new cultural approaches to the study of religion and to begin the process of integrating them in order to articulate a promising agenda for empirical research.

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