

# Historical Development of the Sociology of Religion

The Classical Era

The Secularization Paradigm

New Religious Developments

New Paradigms

Neosecularization Theory

Future Prospects

Summary and Looking Forward

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

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

It is difficult—perhaps impossible—for those of us living in the 21st century to fully understand the magnitude of change that the modern industrial social order thrust upon people in the 18th and 19th centuries. British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1990:xi) begins his book on the birth of the Industrial Revolution in a dramatic fashion by declaring, “The industrial revolution marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents.” We usually associate this revolution with economic changes. We think of developments such as the movement from agriculture and small-scale craft production to large-scale, steam engine-driven manufacturing. These economic changes were, in fact,

revolutionary in themselves. Rather than owning their own tools or having their own land to cultivate, factory workers became wage laborers. This meant they ate only if they made money, and they made money only if they worked for someone else. This made the lives of factory workers in the early Industrial Revolution very precarious. This already highlights how the social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution went beyond the economics of production.

Industrial production also took place in larger and larger factories, which meant greater and greater concentrations of people in the same places. Large cities (for the time) sprung up very quickly with the arrival of people uprooted from their rural homes seeking employment. A city of 50,000 people would be considered small to most of us today, but it was incomprehensibly large to most rural peasants living in the 17th and 18th centuries. And the rates of growth were astonishing. A major early industrial city, Manchester in England, grew from 90,000 people in 1801 to 237,000 in 1831 to 400,000 in 1851. On top of the shock of simply adjusting to urban life, the expansion of the cities produced a seemingly endless list of social problems: overcrowding, pollution, noise, traffic, disease, and so forth.

Hobsbawm (1990:85) observes that the very rhythm of life in industrial society was profoundly different than before. Living in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, we all take for granted what Hobsbawm calls the “tyranny of the clock.” On farms, seconds and minutes and even hours are irrelevant units of time when it comes to



From the Royal Collection Via Wikimedia Commons

**PHOTO 2.1:** Manchester from Kersal Moor (1852)

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

planting and harvesting agricultural crops. But in a factory, just like your college classrooms, seconds and minutes count. If you are like our students and your class begins at 12:00, you want to arrive as close to 12:00 as possible, and if it ends at 1:15, you want to leave no later than 1:15. Because that is all you get “paid” for, you may sit and watch the clock for 75 minutes every class. But the flip side of that coin is that you are responsible for being in that same place and time for 75 minutes whether you want to be or not. The clock owns you in a way that it was completely irrelevant to those living an agrarian lifestyle.

This is why Hobsbawm concludes that, although these revolutionary developments were driven by industrial capitalism, they were not simply economic. They also entailed “a new relationship between [people], . . . a new rhythm of life, a new society, a new historical era” (Hobsbawm 1990:43). Sociology emerged as a discipline because of a desire to understand and control these revolutionary social changes taking place in 19th-century Europe. In contemporary social theorist Charles Lemert’s words, “we may say that the first professional theorists were individuals who could not have done social theory without the new society” (Lemert 2016:4).

Without the Industrial Revolution and the transformation of life it entailed, there would have been no felt need to theorize about society, and hence no development of sociology.

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

## The Classical Era

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

Marx’s analysis centers on the transition from a feudal to a capitalist mode of production. Feudalism and capitalism are similar insofar as they are both societies in which one class exploits another. In these societies, religion serves to pacify the exploited classes and keep them from rising up against their oppressors. In a famous phrase you may have heard, religion “is the opium of the people” (Marx [1844] 1977:131). Where modern society differs for Marx is in the extent of the social disruption associated with industrial capitalism. As conditions get worse and worse for the working class, the narcotic effect of religion is overcome. Workers gain the

true, revolutionary consciousness necessary to recognize and act on their own interests in establishing an exploitation-free society. In Marx's view, this society will also be religion-free because the subjective illusion of religion disappears with the objective conditions of oppression.

Durkheim was centrally concerned with the shifting sources of solidarity in modern society. In premodern societies, solidarity is based on a commonality of beliefs and sentiments among members of society. In ritual celebrations, a "collective effervescence" is felt, which enlivens the collective consciousness. As societies grow larger and more diverse, the collective consciousness wanes and individualism rises. In the transition, Durkheim ([1912] 1995:429) observed, "the former gods are growing old or dying." But because "religion is, in a sense, indispensable," it is destined to be reborn in modern society. Durkheim ([1898] 1973:51) recognized that "the religion of yesterday could not be the religion of tomorrow," so he looked for the specific ways in which religion is transformed. Religion survives in two related forms: as "moral individualism, the cult of the individual," which recognizes the sacredness of the human person (Durkheim [1906] 1953:59), and as civil religious ideals (Durkheim [1912] 1995), both of which are enlivened by national ritual celebrations.

Weber's perspective on modern society is much less unidimensional than Marx's or Durkheim's but has been understood as centering on the process of rationalization. Rationalization entails a growing divide between religion and other spheres of society, both at the intellectual and institutional level (Gorski and Ates 2008). Intellectually, rationalization leads to a "disenchantment of the world" wherein people increasingly look to reason rather than "mysterious incalculable forces" to understand the world (Weber [1917] 1946:155,139). Institutionally, politics, economics, art, and other "value-spheres" increasingly operate according to their own logics ("rationalities"), distinct from religion. This is exemplified by Weber's famous characterization of modern capitalism as an "iron cage" of rationality (Weber [1905] 1958a:181). Although a religiously inspired ethic helped give rise to rational capitalism, once it is established the economic system operates on its own and according to its own logic, without any need for that religious ethic. It is important to note, however, that Weber is arguing that religion becomes a separate sphere in modern society, not that it disappears entirely.

Marx, Durkheim, and Weber set the intellectual boundaries within which later sociological work flowed. Taken together, these classical theorists established the dominant perspective for sociology's understanding of religion: modernity is a secularizing force. At the same time, the transformations of religion they predicted represent different understandings of what secularization means. Like Marx, those working in the Marxist tradition equated modernization with the (eventual) disappearance of religion. By contrast, those following Weber and Durkheim theorized various transformations of religion but not its complete decline or disappearance in modern society. Those predicting the transformation, not disappearance of religion, became the dominant group of scholars studying religion in the third quarter of the 20th century. They established what been called the "secularization paradigm" (Tschannen 1991).

Generally, a paradigm can be understood as a school of scholarship in which members are in fundamental agreement about key theoretical presuppositions, concepts,

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

## The Secularization Paradigm

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

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

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

Peter Berger (1967) begins by arguing that unlike many animals, humans are "unfinished" at birth due to our underspecialized and undirected instinctual structure. Consequently, we must make a "world" for ourselves that renders our environment stable and predictable. Berger uses the term *nomos* to denote this cultural world, including both a worldview (the intellectual framework and knowledge that explains the world) and an ethos (its moral attitude toward living in the world). Over time, this *nomos* that we as human beings created in the first place becomes seen as something that exists independently of us. Society then socializes individuals into this *nomos*, helping to create a stable social order (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Berger argues that this process of "world construction" is fundamentally religious because the *nomos* cannot be seen as optional or arbitrary. Religion legitimizes

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

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

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

Berger also saw consequences of secularization for religious organizations. He concluded that a modern religious organization has two options. First, it can accommodate, “play the game of religious free enterprise,” and “modify its product in accordance with consumer demand.” Second, it can entrench itself and maintain its worldview behind whatever socioreligious plausibility structures it can construct (Berger 1967:153). A religious organization that takes the first course tends to become secularized from within and to lose its sense of transcendence or sacredness. It focuses on “marketing” the faith to a clientele that is no longer required to “buy.” In the process, the faith may be severely compromised. A group that takes the second course, by contrast, may uphold the sanctity of their worldview, but at the cost of being an “irrelevant” minority faith that exists separate from society.

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

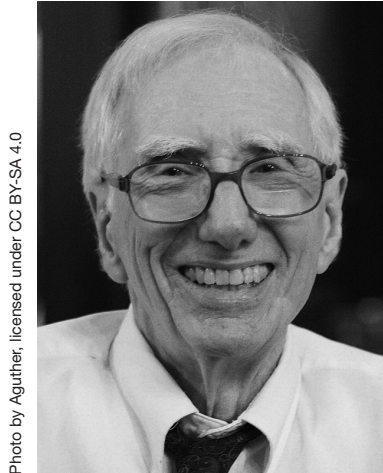


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**PHOTO 2.2:** Robert N. Bellah

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

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

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

Furthermore, individuals have more autonomy in being able to think for themselves and to create their own personalized system of meaning. In this post-traditional situation, the individual confronts life not as a “one possibility thing” but as an “infinite possibility thing” (Bellah 1970c:40). Each person is “capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation and . . . of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms . . . that [shape] his own existence” (Bellah 1970c:42). Bellah and his colleagues would later give a prime example of this concept in

their best-selling book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. A young nurse they interviewed, Sheila Larson (a pseudonym), told them the following:

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

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

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

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

## New Religious Developments

At the same time secularization theory was being established as the dominant post-classical era paradigm in sociology, religion surged back into public and scholarly consciousness in ways that secularization theorists had not anticipated. Beginning in the 1960s, scholars noticed an increase in the prominence of nonconventional religious groups known as “new religious movements” (NRMs) (see Chapter 6). Among the earliest studied were Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church (the “Moonies”), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON, a.k.a.,



“Hare Krishnas”), Divine Light Mission, the Children of God, Jesus People, UFO cults, Scientology, and Soka Gakkai. Some speculated that these NRMs were part of a much broader cultural shift that included more diffuse quasi-religious phenomena like the human potential movement, astrology, and mysticism. In the 1970s, it appeared that an entire “New Age” movement was emerging as an alternative both to secular modernity and to the established churches of Christianity. In contrast to the expectations of secularization theory, these developments were characterized as a great awakening or consciousness reformation (Wuthnow 1976).

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

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

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

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

## New Paradigms

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

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

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

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

religiously engaged people as consumers of “products” that provide these benefits and religious organizations (churches, sects, denominations, NRMs) as “firms” competing with each other in the religious marketplace to supply those products (Finke and Stark 2005; Stark and Bainbridge 1996).

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

In the breakthrough article for the economics of religion, Finke and Stark tested perhaps the central hypothesis derived from the religious economies model, namely that “religious pluralism” contributes to higher levels of religious participation (what they call “religious mobilization”). Using quantitative data from the 1906 Census of Religious Bodies, Finke and Stark (1988) studied the impact of “adherence” (their indicator of mobilization) on “pluralism” and found a positive relationship. While Finke

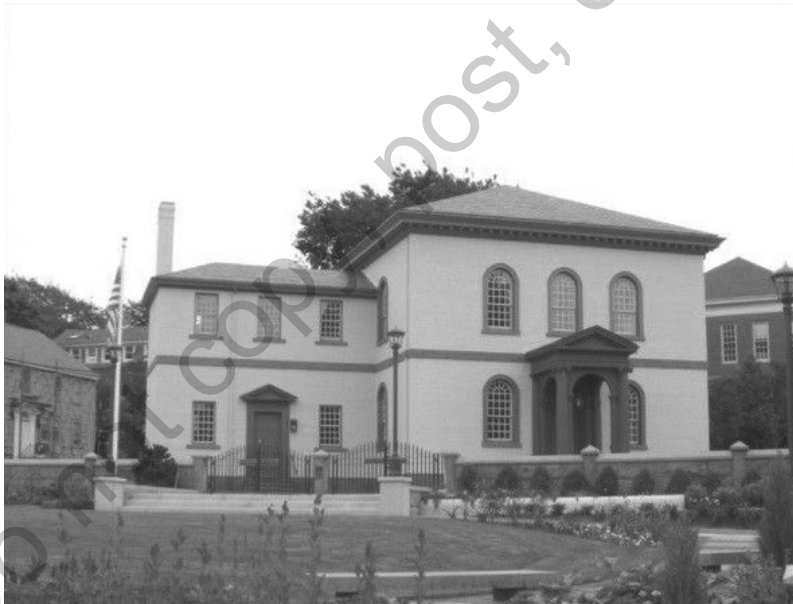


Photo by Keith Roberts

**PHOTO 2.3:** Tuoro Synagogue

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

and Stark (1988) provided empirical support for the religious economies perspective, the data on which the support is built do not give any evidence for a trend over time. Thus, the empirical jewel in the religious economies crown is the award-winning book, *The Churching of America*. Among other things, in this book Finke and Stark (2005) argue that between 1776 and 2000, religious “adherence” in the United States grew from 17% to 62% and that this linear, upward slope is exactly the opposite of what is predicted by secularization theory.

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

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

## DOING RESEARCH ON RELIGION

### THE CONTROVERSY OVER SECULARIZATION AND PLURALISM

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

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

Sociologist Kevin Breault responded to Finke and Stark's work using more recent data—1980 data on churches and church membership from the Glenmary Research Center—in which he found the exact opposite: “a highly significant, consistently negative relationship between religious pluralism and religious participation” (Breault 1989a:1049). In a comment on Breault's article, Finke and Stark rejected Breault's findings. They noted that they asked a colleague—fellow rational choice theorist Laurence Iannaccone—to replicate Breault's statistical models using the same Glenmary data and that Iannaccone found a highly significant *positive* relationship between pluralism and participation (correlation of 0.21) (Finke and Stark 1989). For his part, Breault replied with a defense of his methodology and conclusions. He, too, recalculated the pluralism index and religious adherence rates and again found a relationship of almost exactly the same magnitude as Iannaccone's, only *negative* (correlation of  $-0.22$ ). The exchange ended at an impasse (Breault 1989b).

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

Olson explained that when he inspected the statistical analysis software program files that Iannaccone used—which were provided to Olson by Iannaccone in the spirit of scientific objectivity and empiricism that we discuss in Chapter 3—he discovered a simple mathematical error in the programming language. The relationship between pluralism and participation in the 1980 Glenmary data was in fact negative.

Does the preponderance of the data support a positive or negative relationship between pluralism and participation? By extension, does the evidence support the old secularization paradigm or the new paradigm perspective on the effect of pluralism on religion more generally? Mark Chaves and Philip Gorski have done a secondary analysis of 193 empirical tests of the relationship. After a careful critique of the methods of research in each study, they concluded that the large majority of studies indicate that pluralism in itself does *not* increase religious vigor or commitment in most social settings (Chaves and Gorski 2001). On the other hand, competition due to a plurality of religious groups does seem to increase religious commitment in *some* situations. More research is needed to understand the circumstances that create a growth situation and those that do not. Still, this review of an extensive body of empirical literature does indicate that no dependable *general law* can be supported that identifies pluralism as a consistent cause of religious vitality or of decline.

A third emerging paradigm is what Smilde and May (2010) have called the “strong program” in the sociology of religion. Unlike Warner's new paradigm and the religious economies paradigm, the strong program has not been pursued self-consciously. Rather, it emerged as a distinctive style of empirical research conducted by many scholars in the 1980s and 1990s and remains a prominent approach today. By strong program, Smilde and May mean an approach that treats religion not as a dependent variable (something to be explained) but as an independent variable (something that has explanatory power itself). Since the early 1980s, published articles on religion in sociology journals that analyze religious processes as a primary causal variable have outnumbered those that see social processes as primary.

Smilde and May (2015) also show an increasing tendency for the outcomes predicted by religion to be positive or pro-social. The strong program can be seen very clearly in studies that have repeatedly found positive effects of religious involvement on many health outcomes, especially for disadvantaged social groups.

Sociologists have found that religion promotes more healthy lifestyles, such as abstinence from or moderation in consumption of alcohol, drugs, and other risky behaviors. Religion also connects people in a deep and meaningful way, facilitating friendships and other networks of social support, both material and emotional. It provides mechanisms (both beliefs and practices) for coping with the stressors that reduce physical and mental well-being. It enhances feelings of self-esteem and efficacy, and encourages healthy emotions like forgiveness and hope. The central, causal role of religion in the strong program challenges the old secularization paradigm idea that religion will lose its social significance in modern society.

## Neosecularization Theory

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

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

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

This can be seen in the decline of “blue laws” in the United States. Blue laws are also called “Sunday statutes” or “Sunday closing laws,” because they typically prescribe certain activities (especially the sale of alcohol) or require certain businesses to be closed (notably car dealerships) on Sundays. In their origins these prohibitions are government-enforced religious codes and so may be better called “Sabbath laws.” The term *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word meaning rest (*shabbat*), and notably

appears as the third of Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). God created the heavens, earth, and humankind in six days, and “on the seventh day he rested” (Genesis 2:2). In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is observed from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. The dominance of Christianity in Europe when these laws took on their current form dictated that they would apply to Sunday, the traditional Christian day of worship. In colonial America, the Sunday statutes were supposed to have been written on blue paper giving rise to the term *blue laws* (Laband and Heinbuch 1987).

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

Sunday statutes still exist in a number of places. A few examples are Illinois banning horse racing, Minnesota banning car sales, Maine banning hunting, and Arkansas banning most alcohol sales. The continued existence of these laws highlights the fact that the process of societal-level secularization is not uniform or inevitable. It is often the consequence of struggles between groups over how much religious versus secular authority should control the functioning of other social institutions (Smith 2003). Today, any private business can *voluntarily choose* to be closed on Sunday, for religious or secular reasons. Most do not, but see the “Illustrating Sociological Concepts” box for a prominent exception.



Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

**PHOTO 2.4:** Hobby Lobby Store Hours Sign

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

# ILLUSTRATING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

## WHY CHICK-FIL-A IS CLOSED ON SUNDAYS (AND FEW OTHER BUSINESSES ARE)

S. Truett Cathy died in 2014 a rich man. The 93-year-old was a billionaire, in fact, but he could have been even richer had he opened his Georgia-based chain of nearly 2,000 Chick-fil-A restaurants on Sundays. The company had \$5 billion in revenues in 2013 operating just 6 days a week.

According to the company's website ([chick-fil-a.com](http://chick-fil-a.com)), "Our founder, Truett Cathy, made the decision to close on Sundays in 1946 when he opened his first restaurant in Hapeville, Georgia. He has often shared that his decision was as much practical as spiritual." However, the company's official obituary emphasizes the religious origins of the company policy much more:

Cathy was a devout Southern Baptist who taught Sunday school to 13-year-old boys for more than 50 years. As an extension of the founder's faith and the clearest example of incorporating biblical principles into the workplace, all Chick-fil-A restaurants—without exception—operate with a "Closed-on-Sunday" policy. Rare within the food service industry, this policy allows employees a day for family, worship, fellowship or rest, and also underscores Cathy's desire to put principles and people ahead of profits.

Chick-fil-A's claim to be exceptional in this respect is not just a public relations stunt. No other national food chain closes uniformly on Sundays. To the contrary, food service and other retail businesses are among the interests that have fought "blue laws" most vigorously.

The waning influence of governmentally enforced Sabbath restrictions is evidence of macro-level secularization. Business enterprises are free to operate according to their own institutional norms, which in a capitalist economy center on the pursuit of profit. Of course, the societal-level secularization represented by the institutional differentiation of religion from the economy does not mechanically lead to meso-level secularization. Organizations are free to choose whether to operate according to religious or secular principles, or some combination of the two.

Still, there is pressure for organizations to mimic other organizations in their institutional sphere (called "institutional isomorphism"). So, in the same way that religious colleges and hospitals have become more and more like secular colleges and hospitals, we might expect Chick-fil-A's religiously motivated business practices to decline now that Truett Cathy has passed. In the company's obituary for its founder, Chick-fil-A declared its restaurants "will remain privately held and closed on Sundays." Time will tell.

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*Source:* Chick-fil-A Press Room, "Truett Cathy, Chick-fil-A Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Dies at Age 93" (September 19, 2014). Retrieved from [thechickenwire.chick-fil-a.com/News/Truett-Cathy-ChickfilA-Founder-and-Chairman-Emeritus-Dies-at-Age-93](http://thechickenwire.chick-fil-a.com/News/Truett-Cathy-ChickfilA-Founder-and-Chairman-Emeritus-Dies-at-Age-93)



**Critical thinking:** Reflect on the ways in which “holy days” used for rest and worship have been transformed into busy shopping “holidays.”

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

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



Photo by Sandra Stroud Yamane

**PHOTO 2.5:** Wait Chapel on the Campus of Wake Forest U.

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

In the United States today, many church-related colleges are attempting to take their foundational religious ideals more seriously (Schmalzbauer and Mahoney 2018). Some religiously related colleges, especially within fundamentalist or evangelical traditions, even make personnel decisions and curriculum decisions based on theological principles rather than standard bureaucratic procedures. In so doing, they continue to assert religious authority in organizational deliberations. This would indicate resistance to meso-level secularization. However, in a society that has experienced considerable institutional differentiation of religion from education, the resistance to internal secularization can come with a cost: diminished academic reputation (Burtchaell 1998). Of nationally prominent universities in the United States, few maintain a strong religious identity. Exceptions include Baylor (Baptist), Notre Dame (Catholic), Georgetown (Jesuit/Catholic), Brigham Young (Latter-day Saints), and Pepperdine (Churches of Christ), but the private institutions with the highest measures of academic reputation in the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking do not have strong religious identities (Mixon, Lyon, and Beatty 2004).

Similarly, many hospitals and social service agencies founded by religious bodies operate on the basis of management and administrative procedures used by any modern organization that has similar goals. Some religious agencies take pride in the fact that they are secularized in their operations—that they use conventional business practices to operate. Some, like Catholic hospitals and hospital systems that grew tremendously in the 20th century, struggle to negotiate between their religious values and the ever-present secular pressures to conform and survive (Wall 2011; White 2013).

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

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

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

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

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

## Future Prospects

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By the turn of the 21st century, debates between proponents of these different alternatives to the secularization paradigm had run their course, and each was subject to its own criticism. The new paradigm was seen as too parochial in being elaborated by Warner explicitly as a theory of religion in the United States. The religious economies model was criticized for its rational choice assumptions and the failure of other scholars to document a connection between pluralism and religious vitality. The strong program overrepresented Protestant Christianity in the United States and pro-religious outcomes. Neosecularization theory’s focus on the growing independence of secular social spheres from religious authorities was faulted for its Western and Christo-centric biases (Bender et al. 2012; Gorski and Ates 2008).

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

(1) *Beyond Christianity*. According to Bender, Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde (2012), too often in sociology religion means Christianity, and Christianity is equated with certain Protestant traditions. This is evident not only in the large number of studies across paradigms that focus on evangelical Protestantism in the United States but in some cases in the very definition of religion. Expanding the field’s vision to include other world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism) as well as other religious manifestations (“spiritual not religious”), challenges the field to move beyond seeing religion as coherent systems of meaning focused on otherworldly ends.

(2) *Beyond congregations*. Beginning with Durkheim, many sociologists have strongly distinguished between the sacred and profane, and found the sacred

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

(3) *Beyond beliefs.* Owing in part to its Christo-centrism, sociologists have been overly concerned with the cognitive dimension of religion. As in sociology generally, greater emphasis has been placed recently on religious practices rather than beliefs. For example, in a study of a secular nonprofit organization that provides meals for people with AIDS, Courtney Bender (2003) finds that the way religion manifests itself in this setting is not in how people talk about what they believe, but in what they do. More recently, Bender (2010) has examined how spirituality is deeply rooted in practices like homeopathic healing, yoga, shamanistic drumming, and spiritual belly dance. Getting beyond an excessive focus on beliefs allows sociologists to include more phenomena in their purview, especially ones that are not clearly marked as “religious.”

(4) *Beyond borders.* Bender, Cadge, Levitt, and Smilde (2012) criticize the sociology of religion in the United States for parochialism, but scholars in every country tend to focus on phenomena within their national borders. This is true despite the common recognition of the reality of globalization and the fact that religious groups were probably the first transcultural or transnational institutions and religious individuals among the first migrants (Levitt 2003). Nonetheless, the growing field of transnational studies highlights the flow of people, organizations, and resources across national borders. It emphasizes, for example, the ongoing connections people have with their communities of origin and how those origins continue to influence religious development in the new locale so that it is impossible to understand what is happening religiously without having a transnational perspective (Levitt 2004).

(5) *Beyond religion.* Perhaps the ultimate movement beyond dominant approaches is the increasing recognition of the importance of religious “nones” (including atheists, agnostics, and the religiously unaffiliated) and apostasy (the process of leaving religion). According to the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012a), the global average for religiously unaffiliated population is 16%, and in six countries, a majority of the population is religiously unaffiliated: the Czech Republic (76%), North Korea (71%), Estonia (60%), Japan (57%), Hong Kong (56%), and China (52%). As the percentage of individuals claiming no religious preference continues to grow in many countries, we might expect that this trend will continue into the future, since one of the strongest predictors of being a religious none is having parents who are religious nones. At the same time, many nones are converts from religion to no religion. In a word, they are apostates. As Zuckerman (2012) notes, apostasy

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

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

Sociology as a discipline emerged in the 19th century during a period of dramatic social change, including religious change. The founders wanted to understand that change to help move society in a positive direction, with or without religion. We live today in the late modern era, an era that definitely includes religion. Therefore, sociologists of religion are uniquely situated to contribute to the sociological understanding, and perhaps also the direction, of an ever-changing social reality.

## SUMMARY AND LOOKING FORWARD

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

These theorists gave rise to the secularization paradigm in the sociology of religion. Secularization has been viewed by sociologists as one of the most powerful forces in the modern world. Yet there are marked differences in what are considered its core characteristics. Berger defined it

as loss of sacredness, depicting secularization as undermining the sacred canopy enveloping all of society and making religious choice mandatory (“the heretical imperative”). Bellah viewed secularization as a process of religious evolution, as an increased complexity in religious symbolism and religious structures. As religion evolves it becomes more differentiated, “an infinite possibility thing.” Among these possibilities is a radically personalized form of religion they dub “Sheilism.”

In response to social events highlighting the continuing vitality of religion in the modern world, various new paradigms arose to challenge the “old” secularization paradigm. These include Warner’s “new paradigm” for the study of religion in the United States, Stark and colleagues’

religious economies model, and what Smilde and May call the “strong program” in the sociology of religion. Each of these understands the challenge to secularization differently, but all offer vigorous critiques and alternatives.

As a response to the new paradigm critiques, neosecularization theorists insist that secularization needs to be understood as the declining scope of religious authority at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the societal (macro) level of analysis, secularization is characterized by institutional differentiation and increased autonomy of various aspects of life (business, politics, recreation, etc.) from religious authority. At the meso level, it involves organizations adopting a more “worldly,” rational, utilitarian, and

empirical–scientific approach to decision making. At the micro level, individuals do not orient their understandings of or actions in the world to the dictates of religious authority.

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

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