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SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

## The emerging strong program in the sociology of religion

by David Smilde

February 8, 2010 (February 8, 2010)



Most sociologists of religion seem to agree on two things. First, that the growth of interest in religion—in academia, the media, and society at large—has been accompanied by an increasingly vigorous research agenda in the sub-discipline. And second, that the sociology of religion is currently in a period of paradigmatic reflection. While the “new paradigm” put forward by Stephan Warner in 1993 helped awaken the field from the “dogmatic slumber” into which it was lulled by secularization theory, scholars continue to reflect on the basic conceptualization of religion and religious practice, as well as on the nature of the relationship between religious practice, institutions, and the sociology of religion itself.

Given this existing discussion, when the SSRC asked us to write a working paper on the state of the sociology of religion, Matthew May and I decided to do so through an empirical study. We saw this as the most productive way to analyze where the sub-discipline has come from, and thereby to facilitate discussion of where it should go. To carry out our study, we gathered a sample of 587 sociology journal articles on religion, published between 1978 and 2007, and coded them for religious tradition, national context, causal model, socio-evaluative findings, and funding.

We find clear evidence of the emergence of a “strong program” in the sociology of religion. By this we mean a steady increase of research that portrays religion as an independent variable having causal impact, accompanied by a steady decrease of research portraying religion as a dependent variable caused by something else. We also find that this trend is associated with the increasing prevalence of the idea that religious practice facilitates human well-being—what we call sociological “pro-religiousness.”

But rather than heralding the good news, we see this as an opportunity to critically engage these trends in the sub-discipline. While we welcome a more robust concept of culture, we are concerned that the critiques of the concept of cultural autonomy put forth by feminist, deconstructionist, and postcolonial scholars have barely been heard in sociology. More concretely, we worry that an emphasis on autonomy could lead to a selective focus on those geographic contexts and religious traditions that appear to validate this approach. We also seek to understand whether growing pro-religiousness will marginalize critical perspectives, as well as ignore or understate the existence of uncomfortable religious phenomena. Here, again, while these are issues worthy of philosophical and methodological debate, we treat them empirically, in order to identify trends and determine whether they are related.

Some of our findings provide cause for concern. We indeed find evidence of continued thematic concentration on the topics traditionally given privileged treatment by American sociologists of religion: the religious history of the United States, Protestantism, and Christianity more broadly. Over the same thirty-year period that has seen an exponential surge of interest in globalization, the sociology of religion has seen virtually no diversification in its subject matter. We also find that articles on the United States and all forms of Christianity, except Catholicism, are significantly more likely to portray religion as an independent variable—precisely what postcolonial theory would predict.

Other findings are unexpected and stimulating. We examine pro-religiousness by coding articles for positive or negative “socio-evaluative findings.” Socio-evaluative findings are “positive” when they show religion to contribute to human agency, autonomy, or concrete social outcomes generally thought to be positive. They are “negative” when they clearly show religious practice to diminish human agency or autonomy, or to have concrete social outcomes generally considered negative (a more extensive discussion of this coding can be found in the methodological appendix to our essay).

For the first twenty-five years of our study (through 2002), there was a clear increase in pro-religiousness, with positive socio-evaluative findings on religion steadily proliferating and negative socio-evaluative findings diminishing. But in the last five-year period we show there has been a surge of both positive and negative socio-evaluative findings. We consider this a positive trend, revealing increasing critical engagement and diversity in the sub-discipline.

We also look at how funding might be related to these trends. To put it bluntly, we wondered if the growth of funding from private and religious foundations facilitated the trend towards the strong program, pro-religiousness, and thematic concentration. We found no relationship with the strong program, but an interesting and not entirely intuitive relation to pro-religiousness. All funding types were positively related to the increase in positive

findings on religion.

However, the real story is the overwhelming relationship between public funding and pro-religiousness. Articles with public funding are twice as likely as articles with no funding to report positive findings on religion. This correlation is stronger than any we find to be associated with private funding, a result that clearly contradicts the common image of government knowledge elites as motors of secularization, and appears instead to reinforce [Winnifred Fallers Sullivan's](#) description of a new religious universalism in the US federal government.

This is very much a working paper, as we are still collecting and analyzing data. Thus we hope for a vigorous discussion and welcome your criticism, as we ourselves continue to think.

Read the full [SSRC Working Paper on "The Emerging Strong Program in the Sociology of Religion"](#) (pdf).

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## David Smilde

**David Smilde** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Georgia. The author of *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism* (University of California, 2007), he is currently at work on a project on religion and political conflict in Venezuela during the era of Hugo Chavez.

### 5 COMMENTS



Charles Gelman  
13 years ago

At *Inside Higher Ed*, Scott Jaschik cites "The Emerging Strong Program" in an article on the resurgence of religion in sociology:

*The paper — by David Smilde, a professor of sociology, and Matthew May, a graduate student, both at the University of Georgia — finds much that would encourage scholars who want to see more research on religion. But the paper also raises questions about whether American sociologists may be too narrowly focused on some religious groups over others, and over the impact of outside funding, which is growing.*

[...]

*The changes outlined in the report "are pretty significant" and show "a realization on the part of sociologists and other academics, too, of the enduring significance of religion in the modern world," said Neil Gross, an associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia. Gross studies the sociology of academic life, and while he noted "the stereotype that most professors don't pay attention to religion," he added that it has "never really been true."*



Joe Wheeler  
13 years ago

It may be worthy of note that the five journals examined by Smilde and May are all based in the United States and primarily editorially guided by American social scientists. My guess is that the articles themselves in these journals similarly look primarily at the phenomenon of religion and society as found in the USA.

What is the significance of this? To my mind, it reflects a common bias in sociology and related disciplines, namely centrism, as in American-centric, Eurocentric, etc. While this in itself is normative in the sense that human-related disciplines are not the same across the world, but rather reflect the larger cultural apparatuses in which they operate, and which the Smilde and May study shows via primarily US governmental and private foundation grants. Therefore, rather than a 'study of the sociology of religion,' the proper view would be 'the sociology of the sociological study of religion in the United States.' This distinction is, I think, important, since arguments about the primacy of religion as a phenomenon with sociological consequences vs. the sociocultural determinants of the role and characterization of religion, tend to go round in a circle lacking a socio-comparative critique. It is not at all clear that the same or even similar dynamics could be found in other Western societies when compared with the US phenomenon.

Without such a comparative view, while Smilde and May's discoveries remain interesting and hopefully generative of better scholarship, the applicability of findings is still ultimately tied to the functioning of just two or three societies (primarily the USA, but possibly similar dynamics in Canada and I think increasingly in the UK). Put another way, there is the risk of new views coming out of this discussion becoming inbred. I would not, for example, anticipate an equivalent set of findings when applied to e.g. France, the Scandinavian nations, Italy, or Israel.

Even the pivotal work of Weber in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is susceptible to this potential bias, as his view was at least in part based upon his experience of attending a wedding of his relatives in N. Carolina around 1905; he was therefore subject to a phenomenon linked inextricably to the American experience, that later opened up his work to criticism as to generalizability or specificity (e.g. Scottish Calvinism, the rise of

characteristics presaging capitalism in Italian and other Catholic enclaves [as per Rodney Stark's work]). Even comparative studies of such proximal and similar societies as those of Canada and the USA may reveal differences, e.g. the evolutionary nature of the Canadian state vs. the revolutionary experience of the USA and the differing mindsets that come out of those processes (see Michael Adams's *Fire and Ice* for Canadian vs American social attitude differences).

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Nathan Schneider  
13 years ago

This discussion also continues at Oliver Morin's blog at in International Cognition and Culture Institute, the center of gravity for recent cognitive studies of religion.

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David Smilde  
13 years ago

Joe Wheeler is entirely correct to point out that this study really just focuses on the sociology of religion in the United States and that other national contexts would like show significant differences. I should point out that the SSRC originally asked us to focus more broadly (and of course one of the issues we wanted to examine from the beginning was precisely the continued geographic concentration of empirical focus in US sociology of religion). But given the labor-intensive type of analysis we decided to undertake, we decided we had to concentrate on one context. Indeed in writing our paper we ended up creeping towards generality and speaking of "the sociology of religion" in the abstract. In moving forward we are going to have to be more careful to circumscribe what we are doing as "US sociology of religion."

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Lynn R. Davidman  
13 years ago

I agree with the section of the essay on the need to de-Christianize the sociology of religion. I have a "minority" perspective in the sociology of religion; just as many of the leading scholars who study Christianity were steeped in a Christian upbringing, I too grew up steeped in a deeply Judaic world. That shows up in some of the basic underlying assumptions of many of my colleagues. Several years ago I was invited to a conference that began on a Sunday morning. As the organizer started to introduce the program, the first words uttered were "What are we all doing here on a Sunday?" to which I replied, there is no reason for me not to be here on a Sunday. Thus Christo-centric assumptions are embedded in the culture of many prominent sociologists of religion.

These Christo-centered assumptions are not only reflected in our social interactions and institutional norms; as sociologists of religion, the discipline itself is deeply inflected by a taken for granted notion that "religion" is what Protestantism is. This makes some sense given that the majority of people living in the contemporary United States are Protestant. But by focusing upon belief and church attendance as important "variables" indicating degrees of "religiosity," this perspective has ignored the ways a practice-centered religion might be similar, and different, from the dominant Protestant faiths. Studying Judaism as a religion in the U.S. necessarily brings the body into the center of sociological discussion of religion.

Orthodox Jews have numerous daily practices through which they create in an ongoing fashion their commitment to the "ancient" rules, as they are continually interpreted and reinterpreted through generations of rabbinic scholars. Their abiding concern has been the proper performance of the deity's laws, including the numerous religious practices that govern the daily life of traditional Jews, including many embodied practices. This is a religion that is enacted bodily, from the particular movements of the body during the communal recitation, in the Fall, of the prayer for rain, to the minutest details of sexual relations between a married couple.

Working with the insights to be gleaned from a religion whose orientation is distinct in several important ways from the Christian-dominated assumptions and theories about the nature of religion, can deeply enrich the focus of the sociology of religion.