Sociology of religion

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abstract   A summary of definitions of religion and magic is followed by an outline of the main questions (inequality, cohesion, rationalization) and major scientific research programmes (historical materialism, structural functionalism, interpretative individualism, and rational choice and market theory) in which the history of the scientific debate and the state of the art is delineated. Research results on capita selecta, the evolution of the gods, secularization and unchurching and new religious movements are presented.

keywords   cohesion ◆ evolution ◆ inequality ◆ new religious movements ◆ rationalization ◆secularization

Religion and magic

Through time, magic and religion together with technology and law have aided humankind to avoid existential uncertainty. There are no reports of societies without religion and magic, and their ubiquity is understood by humans' need to come terms with mortality, suffering of the righteous, fate and fortune, both collectively and individually. Tylor (2010 [1871]) described religion as 'the belief in supernatural beings'. The world was one and inseparable, and everything possessed a soul or spirit at the stage of animism, religion's evolutionary first stage. Magic resulted from inadequate knowledge and early humans' deficient faculties to control nature. In modern culture both religion and magic were *survivals*, cultural traits belonging to an earlier stage. Marett (2004 [1909]) assumed that religion inspired awe; religion was danced, and not thought out. Participating in rituals and ceremonies stimulates the production of endorphins giving the participants a feeling of beatitude (Dunbar, 2006), which may account for Durkheim's *effervescence collective*, or the occasionally 'electrified' social order. Agreeing with Tylor on animism, Frazer (1994 [1890]) reasoned that early humans were helped by magic to make their habitat understandable and ordered; their deities could be pleaded and bargained with. Mauss and Hubert's (1972 [1903/4]) 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie' ('An outline of a general theory of magic') influenced Durkheim, who understood that there was no church of magic; magic was a speculative business of individuals trying to achieve practical goals (Durkheim, 1991 [1912]). To Malinowski (1974 [1925]) it was proto-science, people resorted to magic when routine practices were of no avail to reach their (technical) goals. Yet, it was social, and present at all stages of social evolution (Tambiah, 1990).

The distinction has held: magic has to do 'with the manipulation of the universe for quite specific ends' and is not about 'the meaning of the universe' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1987: 30). Magic is the concern of (groupings of) individuals, who apply it for concrete purposes when effective knowledge fails them. Religion is a shared phenomenon referring to supernatural notions and practices, and their consequences. It is immune to falsification, while magic is not. Not that it is free from magic, but religion shows a decline of magic.

Grosso modo, nowadays two types of definitions of

religion are used. In substantive definitions, the contents, such as religion's super- or extra-natural beliefs and practices, are stressed. Functional ones focus on the function the shared religious values, norms, practices and their consequences have in society. Durkheim's (1991 [1912]: 103–4) description: *un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c'est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Église, tous ceux qui y adhèrent* ('A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' [Durkheim, 1976: 47]) exemplifies the functional one. Geertz's (1966: 4) lauded definition, 'a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' focuses more on substance.

Inequality, cohesion and rationalization and their scientific research programmes

Ultee et al. (2003) discerned inequality, social order and rationalization processes as the main questions of sociology, and distinguish four major *scientific research programmes* addressing these: historical materialism, structural functionalism, interpretive individualism and rational choice theory. The state of the art of the sociology of religion is charted with the help of these questions.

Inequality and religion

Inequality, 'who gets what, and why, and what are the societal consequences of inequality?', concerned Marx (e.g. 1976 [1867]) and Engels (e.g. 1976 [1845]). Religion reflected the stage of development of, at the time capitalist society, and was instrumental to the wants of the elite and reconciliation of workers with their destiny. To Marx (1976 [1843/4]) religion was human-made, false consciousness or self-alienation, and would disappear when the workers were owners of the means of production and would live in material comfort. Regarding today's affluence and diminished relevance of religion, he could have been right. Engels (1976 [1845]) recognized religion's revolutionary potential and role in history, with its parallels between early Christianity, *eine Bewegung Unterdrückter* (a movement of the

suppressed), and the modern labour movement, an oppressed group without rights.

The hard core of the historical materialist scientific research programme reads, no matter the mode of production in society, that any inequality rests on coercion, and coercion may cause struggle. Under certain conditions struggle could remove coercion, which might result in less inequality (Ultee et al., 2003). Inequality, sometimes disguised as deprivation, absolute or relative, makes humans receptive to particular religious or political message. It effects sect and cult formation, and personal religious commitment to these groupings as Weber and Troeltsch have argued. They analysed the relationships between sect and church membership, and social class and status group. Church one was born into, and sect membership was voluntary, according to Weber. Troeltsch (1912) distinguished churchly, sectarian and mystical behaviour. Churches stood for the establishment, while sects, mainly lower class, tried not to compromise with the world, and in cults, mystical behaviour, i.e. more or less unorganized spirituality, was found. Niebuhr (1929) saw sects as the 'churches of the disinherited', lacking economic and political power. When they prospered and grew more established, sects accommodated to the world. Losing the element of rejection of the world, they transformed into a church, and could no longer provide the disinherited; thus making room for new movements.

The 1950s and 1960s were the high tide of classifying and categorizing in sociological scholarship. In that spirit Glock (e.g. Glock and Stark, 1965) distinguished five types of deprivation: economic, social, organismic, ethical and psychic deprivation. They caused particular types of religious groupings, sects, churches, healing movements, reform movements and cults, respectively. The type predicted the 'career' of the group. Glock also introduced survey research as a tool into the field; Demerath availed himself of data from survey research for his *Social Class in American Protestantism* (1965), on the relationship between class and religious involvement. By positioning churches and sects on a one-dimensional continuum of tension with the sociocultural context, Johnson (e.g. 1963) – placing sects on the extreme of 'high tension', and churches on the pole of 'no tension' – transformed an ideal type church/sect dichotomy into a sharper analytical tool. Although the historical materialist scientific research programme is not that much used in the field, and deprivation has fallen into disuse, the socioeconomic status component time and again has been established, e.g. in recruitment by (religious) groupings, i.e. the mechanisms of ex- and inclusion based on class and level of education (e.g. Johnson, 1997; Martin, 2005).

Social cohesion and religion

Social order was Durkheim's main concern. Society consisted of intermediate groupings, mediating between the individual and the state. The degree of integration varied, and absence or a high degree of cohesion would cause violence in society, and violence of the individual against him/herself (anomic suicide). He thought the compelling and obligatory elements of religion crucial, but later on, Durkheim grew aware of religion's integrative, collective and stabilizing aspects. Social order is sustained by venerating the totem, society itself; it is guarding the universal distinction between the sacred (things set apart) and the profane (everyday routine). Apart from differing on what caused societal evolution, intellect and structure *versus* individuals and complexity of relationships, Van Gennep (1904, 1906, 1920) criticized Durkheim's views on totemism, as these were uncritical interpretations based on insufficient and one-sided sources.

Structural functionalism addresses the issue, of why can human beings live peacefully together and not resort to violence? Its hard core reads, a society is integrated to a degree, insofar as it consists of intermediate groups (structure), with generally shared values and norms (culture), and the more integration in the intermediate groupings, the more integrated society is (Ultee et al., 2003). Merton (e.g. 1964), by subsuming suicide under norm-transgressive behaviour, evolved the scientific research programme (on anomie), thus expanding the reach of normative theory. It reads, the better the norms of society, and the goals and means of its members are attuned to each other, the better its members will stick to its norms on norm adherence and norm transgression. It proved expedient in explaining (re-)affiliation and conversion, and of (church) fissions and fusions (Hak, 2007a, 2007b).

Measured by the number of studies, the structural functionalist scientific research programme was most important. Parsons' *action theory* and his studies on American society and religion were deemed monuments at the time. Yinger's *Toward a Field Theory of Religion* (1965) and *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970), and O'Dea's *Sociology of Religion* (1966), among numerous others, reflect the main trends of this epoch.

British anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard (1965) – who later in life distanced himself from Durkheim – and their peers used structural functionalism, resulting in numerous classical studies on religion in Africa and Asia (e.g. Evans-Pritchard, 1951 [1937], 1956; Firth, 1967; Fortes, 1987; Lienhardt, 1961; Middleton, 1987). Mary Douglas's studies bear Durkheim's hallmark. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), she reasoned that social order was established by distinguishing cleanliness and pollution; while some religions underscore rules on cleanliness and pollution, others do not. In *Natural Symbols* (1970), Douglas came up with a grid-group scheme. Combining group, the degree of integration (high or low) of societies, with grid, the degree of living up to norms and values (high and low), resulted in a two by two table in which societies were classified respectively as to propensity to ritualism, anti-ritualism, good and evil, millennialism, magic and witchcraft. However, the heyday of structural functionalism is over, as younger generations have turned to other paradigms. Yet new concepts such as implicit religion prove structural functionalism is far from worn out.

Rationalization and religion

Weber was engrossed in theodicies and ways and means of salvation. The worldviews contained in 'universal' religions, in which rejection of the world, and need for salvation, had become an integral element, were either more passive or active. The more active the worldview, the more the *Entzauberung der Welt* (disenchantment with the world) had progressed: '*Interessen (materielle und ideelle), nicht: Ideen, beherrschen unmittelbar das Handeln der Menschen. Aber: die "Weltbilder", welche durch "Ideen" geschaffen wurden, haben sehr oft als Weichensteller die Bahnen bestimmt, in denen die Dynamik der Interessen das handeln fortbewegte*' (Weber, 1920: 252) ('Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest' [Gerth and Wright Mills, 1991: 280]). Both material and immaterial interests spurred people, yet (religious) ideas were often decisive.

The Weberian, interpretive individualist scientific research programme reads that every highly developed pre- and early-modern society possesses a religion containing a worldview, of which the aim and means of how to reach salvation are central aspects. The more activist the worldview, the more practical-rational the way of life of its adherents, and the more the adherents will avail themselves of the opportunities to produce goods efficiently (Ultee et al., 2003).

Religion was humankind's answer to the 'irrational'. Yet, in modern society, disenchanted with science, religion, more than ever, could provide purpose in life, as well as ethical rules for practical action. While the powerful used religion to uphold societal status quo, religious inspired charismatics could resist the established order, and do away with

das heilige Alltägliche ('the sacredness of tradition'). Rationalization processes had resulted in the uniqueness of western society, characterized by science and art, the state and its bureaucracy, and capitalism. In religion, reaching salvation had become less magical, and consequently Protestants knew fewer sacraments than Roman Catholics did.

In *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), Weber (1920 [1904/5]) made evident a *Wahlverwandtschaft* ('elective affinity') between a way of life rooted in early modern Protestantism, in which the Protestant's everyday labour became worship and wasting time a sin, and the spirit of modern capitalism, a systematic and efficient striving for profitability. Ultimately, the once religious ethic became a secularized way of life. In *Tokugawa Religion*, Bellah (1957) analysed the influence of 'ideas' in Japan 1542–1868, where he found a variant of the Protestant ethic and inner-worldly asceticism. In *The Religious Factor*, Lenski (1961), with the help of survey data, tested Weber's Protestant ethic thesis in white, black, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities. 'The book's legacy as well as continuities and new opportunities in the study of religion can be appreciated' according to Wuthnow (2004: 205), stressing the importance of Lenski's study.

For Weber (1922), sociology was a '*Wissenschaft, welche soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will*' ('Sociology is a science that attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects' [Weber, 1947: 88]). Most Weberian studies accentuate interpretation, and pay less attention to causal explanation. Mead and Blumer elaborated a scientific research programme known as symbolic interactionism. Humans react on the interpretation of conduct and they construct their reality by sharing symbols. Symbolic interactionists prefer qualitative methods, especially participant observation, because they consider close contact and immersion in the everyday lives of the participants a necessary condition for understanding how actors give meaning to actions, how they define situations and how reality is constructed. Most research on new religious movements employs a symbolic interactionist perspective and use qualitative methods.

Rational choice, market theory and religion

The fourth major scientific research programme, rational choice theory, states that because of human nature, individuals choose the most efficient and cost-effective means as they perceive them. Individuals operate in a sociocultural context, consisting of their personnel networks, i.e. intermediate groupings, which structures and restricts their actions (Boudon, 1981; Coleman, 1990; Hak, 1998, 2007a, 2007b).

According to Stark and Bainbridge (1987), individuals want rewards, make investments and seek high exchange ratios. Investments are costs made in lasting relationships that have not yet yielded their rewards fully. Explanations, 'models of reality designed to guide action', help individuals achieve rewards. Rewards, everything humans strive for, and costs, everything they avoid, are unequally distributed. Some rewards are scarcer than other ones or attainable in the far future or another world only; then, people will satisfy themselves with compensators. The more general the compensator, the more extensive the array of rewards, and the more specific a compensator, the more limited the array. Religion consists of 'very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods', and magic 'refers to all efforts to manipulate supernatural forces … without reference to a god or god(s) or to general explanations of existence' (Stark and Finke, 2000: 91, 105).

Stark and Finke (2000) have reformulated the theory. In their so-called market theory, churches, sects, etc. become businesses that sell goods. In a non-competitive market, a dominating firm neither specializes nor finds its way to potential customers. Competition achieves specialized, efficient businesses, and raises a higher level of religious participation. They define religion as a whole consisting of 'very general explanations of existence including the terms of exchange with a god or gods' (Stark and Finke, 2000: 91). Because people want to preserve their social and religious capital, they will shop at near-by sellers rather than at ones more far-off or not shop at all. Thus, as a rule, they do not disaffiliate, and if they do, they re-affiliate more often to groupings that resemble the one they have left, than to groupings with no family resemblance. Ekelund et al. (2006) use models in which the consumers' (believers) utility maximization stands more central than lucrativeness for the 'sellers'. Contrary to market theorists (e.g. Iannaccone, 1994) who see strict churches growing, they see a future for 'liberal' churches, rather than for stricter ones. Lehr and UItee (2009) found that a high degree of church attendance is related to a high degree of belief, and low attendance to less belief, thus falsifying market theorists' predictions. Aarts et al. (2010) tested hypotheses predicting that religious involvement is higher in deregulated religious markets, and that countries having deregulated religious markets for a longer

period have higher levels of involvement. From their analyses, it appeared that deregulation of markets does raise church attendance, and duration of deregulation does not, and that modernization decimates church attendance more than that deregulation raises church attendance.

The economic turn has sparked the field by the elaboration of theory through testing hypotheses, by yielding novel facts and by causing polarization. Its opponents not only brought about a spate of critical assessments among others on the (bounded) rational actor in rational choice theory and the market theory (e.g. Bruce, 1999; Lehman, 2010; Young, 1997), and also by producing alternative competing hypotheses, as we saw.

Evolution of the god(s), secularization and unchurching, (post)industrial religion and new religious movements

The evolution of the god(s)

From its outset, an evolutionary perspective was present in social science. Apart from early anthropologists, who worked from evolutionary paradigms, evolutionary cognizance in Weber's and Durkheim's studies is found, as also in interpretations of their works (Hinkle, 1976; Peacock and Kirsch, 1980; Schluchter, 1988). Both Durkheim and Weber saw rationality overcoming superstition and magic. In the field, Bellah's 'Religious evolution' (1964) was a landmark article. Defining religion as 'a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence', and based on its system of religious symbols, he distinguished primitive, archaic, historic, early-modern and modern religious stages. The evolution of its symbolic forms generated religion's practices and acts, its organization and its societal consequences.

Rituals, celebrating the unity of the community with the mythical beings, kinship and reciprocity, cemented primitive society. In two-classed agrarian archaic societies, an increased number of objectified and specialized gods resided in a hierarchical pantheon mirroring stratified society. To compensate shortcomings, people approached gods with sacrifices; the latter needed priests, which came from the upper layers of society. Societal order was a godly order, and societal conflicts reflected conflicts among the gods. Confucianism, Buddhism, Ancient Greek religion and Judaism found themselves in the historic religion class, early Christianity and Islam representing later phases. The achievement of salvation was of central importance, as everyday life was seen inferior to afterlife. The religious elite were subordinate to political and military elites, and religion was instrumental to the wants of the upper strata, although, it might legitimate societal conflicts. Priests mediate between laity and God in historic Christianity. In early-modern Christianity (Protestantism) the distinction between the chosen and the damned replaced the one between the monastic religious elite and the worldly laity. Everyday life had now become worship, and believing had become an individual ethical attitude (*innerweltliche Askese* ['innerworldly asceticism']). The Predestination dogma formed a new stage of religious rationalization in the sense of *Abstreifung der Magie als Heilsmittel* ('the degree to which religion divested itself of magic as means of salvation'). In modern religion, since the 1960s, the distinction between life *hic et nunc* and the afterlife had disappeared and it formed either a new stage or a transitional one.

Bellah (2011) avails himself of the latest findings in biology, cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. This *opus magnum* is hardly reminiscent of the 1965 article. He sees four phases of culture: *episodic culture*, prelinguistic, perhaps vocal; *mimetic culture*, in which humans communicated entirely with their bodies; then *mythic culture*, 'permeated by myth'; and finally, *theoretic culture*. Graphic invention, external memory and theory construction, i.e. second order thinking, in essence characterizes theoretic culture. '[T]he axial breakthrough involved the emergence of theoretic culture, in dialogue with mythic culture' (Bellah, 2011: 273), and is found in the first millennium BC (the *Axial Age*) in ancient Israel, Greece, China and India. At the stage of theoretic culture, mimetic and mythic cultures are still present. Ritual (communal dancing and storytelling) and myth and theorizing helped early humans survive and create a transcendental reality. Both ritual, which preceded myth, and religion emerged from play. Archaic society, preceding the axial breakthrough, knows of two new interrelated phenomena: kingship and divinity. Both in archaic society and in tribal religions, no clear distinctions between the religious and political spheres exist.

While Bellah unfolds in a *deutend verstehend* ('interpretative understanding') way the genesis and evolution of religion, Moor (2009) looks for explanatory mechanisms. She avails herself of Lenski's ecological evolutionary approach in which technology and ideology of a culture depend on the physical and social environments. The nature of the religious beliefs is related to the structure of society, and both social structure and these beliefs find their origins in the prevailing technology of existence (see Ultee et al., 2003: 343ff.) Moor combines this approach with Topitsch's biomorphic, sociomorphic

and technomorphic thinking models (Topitsch, 1954, 1958, 1979). Biomorphic thinking models are analogous to sexual reproduction (birth, coming of age and death); societies with primitive subsistence know them. The nature of social relations is basic to sociomorphic models. God is the lord of the creation, like a king ruling his realm. Except for primitive societies, all later societies possess these thinking models. In technomorphic ones, the god has a plan when he created heaven and earth, just as engineers design tools. The latter type of models prevails, as societies grew less dependent on the natural environment, and differentiation increased.

Technologies and ideologies depend on the natural and social environments; technology is not the prevailing force, and religious ideas are related to the structure of society. Both social structure and ideas originate from the prevailing way of subsistence. A modification in means of existence causes structural sociocultural adjustments, including religion. In the stories of creation and in the notions on afterlife, the patterns of subsistence return. As control over the environment increases, gods grow more abstract, and belief in hell and heaven fades away. Whereas in societies with strong and powerful leaders the idea of a reigning and governing god is plausible, it is not any longer so in democratic (post)industrial societies in which people make their own decisions.

Both Moor's and Bellah's theories make (the direction of) religious evolution plausible. Yet, Moor's theory explains developments such as secularization, (post)industrial religion, etc. much better than Bellah's does.

Secularization and unchurching

Comte, Marx and Spencer, among many others, were convinced that human history showed a continuous decline of religion, and that modern society would be a secular society. To them, the evolution of the gods formed a prelude to secularization and unchurching. In Europe, both church membership and attendance are starkly reduced (e.g. Halman et al., 2005, 2011; Pollack et al., 2012), North America unchurches as well (e.g. Breault, 1989; Olson, 1998), notwithstanding that US church attendance is over-reported (Hadaway and Marler, 1993, 1998, 2005; Hadaway et al., 1993, 1998). Pew Research (2012) reports that Protestants no longer form the majority in the USA, although they are still the largest group, and in addition to that one in five adults is no longer religiously affiliated, being the fastest growing category. Wuthnow (2007) saw the developments as a 'restructuring of American religion'.

Secularization is a 'hook concept', on which various processes are hung. At the macro-level, secu-

larization stands for decreasing importance of church and religion (religion has lost its authority on ethical issues [Chaves, 1994]). At the meso-level, it indicates that religious doctrines increasingly adapt to the demands of (modern) society and culture. Finally, at the micro-level it refers to diminishing religiosity of individuals, diminishing church membership and church attendance, less strictly adhering to religious doctrines, and a diminishing relevance of religion in everyday life (Dobbelaere, 1981, 1984, 2002, 2007). Dobbelaere found secularization under various labels: 'institutional differentiation or segmentation (Luckmann 1967), autonomization (Berger 1967), rationalization (Berger 1967; Wilson 1982), societalization (Wilson 1976), disenchantment of the world (Weber 1920; Berger 1967), privatization (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967), generalization (Bellah 1967; Parsons 1967), pluralization (Martin 1978), relativization (Berger 1967), this-worldliness (Luckmann 1990), individualization (Bellah et al. 1985), bricolage (Luckmann 1979), unbelief (Berger 1967), decline of church religiosity (Martin 1978)' (Dobbelaere, 1998: 452–456).

Tschannen (1992) saw the study on secularization in the 1960s grow into a paradigm, which had matured into normal science in the 1970s. It was borne by communities with shared exemplars: differentiation as the division of social life into various spheres, rationalization as a concomitant collapse of an overarching worldview and increase of unbelief, and *mondainization* or accommodation to the world; he considers the latter subordinate to the former two. Weaknesses were the paradigm's restriction to the West, and lacking a global perspective.

Secularization is still starkly debated (e.g. Ammerman, 2005; Hout and Greely, 1987, 1998; Olson, 2008; Presser and Chaves, 2007; Stark and Finke, 2000; Stark et al., 2002; Thumma and Travis, 2007; Wuthnow, 2007). Berger (1999: 2), revoking his 1968 prediction that soon religious believers were likely to be found in small sects only, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture, now thinks 'the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false'. He coined a new concept: desecularization: 'The world today, with some exceptions … is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever'. Whereas for Berger, 'a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled secularization theory is essentially mistaken', Stark finds that secularization, i.e. increasing unchurching and diminishing church attendance, has no place in scientific discourse (Stark, 2008; Stark and Finke, 2000). Cities, with a large number of religious 'firms', are places of worship, while rural areas are religiously indifferent because of a lack of supply. The weakening of

traditional beliefs makes room for cult and sect formation, and consequently, a greater number of religious entrepreneurs raises a higher number of believers. He and his likes think European unchurching exceptional (e.g. Finke and Stark, 1988; Iannaccone, 1992, 1994, 1998; Stark and Finke, 2000).

Bruce (e.g. 2002) does not think that new religions will compensate for the loss of the churches, and secularization goes on because of two interacting processes of increasing pluralism and increasing individualism-egalitarianism. Franzmann et al. (2006: 12) comment '*Dass die Zeit aber noch nicht gekommen ist, die Säkularisierungsthese zu Grabe zu tragen, wie Rodney Stark (1999) dies empfiehlt, zeigt schon der Umstand, dass die Debatte über die Säkularisierungsthese in der Religionssoziologie heute wohl kontroverser geführt wird als je zuvor*' ('That the time has not yet come to bury the secularization thesis, as Rodney Stark [1999] propagates, is already shown by the fact that the debates on the secularization thesis are nowadays more controversial than ever before').

As causes of secularization scholars have pointed to science, democratization, industrialization and increase in societal wealth. These processes modify the (religious) worldview, and are producing diminishing integration and religiosity, i.e. less church membership and church attendance, slacker doctrinal views and diminishing significance of religion in everyday life (e.g. Kruijt, 1933; Nisbet, 1966; Te Grotenhuis, 1998). Scholars have also argued that religious pluralism, i.e. various intermediate groups with differing religious values and norms and practices, erodes society's plausibility structure, and effects a lesser degree of integration, a lesser degree of observation of (personalized) religious norms, less participation and membership (Hak and Sanders, 1996). Cognitive processes may also promote disbelief, as some individuals are more prone to 'analytically override initially flawed intuitions in reasoning' than others are (Gervais and Norenzayan, 2012). Martin (2005: 7), stresses the relevance of contexts in the process: 'the theory of secularization … is profoundly inflected by particular histories', whereas he sees 'no consistent relation between the degree of scientific advance and a reduced profile of religious influence, belief and practice' (Martin, 2005: 119). He defends differentiation as the backbone of the process (Martin, 2005: 20). Lehr and Ultee (2009) find Davie's (1994) proposition on believing without belonging (see below), Iannaccone's (1994) religious competition hypothesis and Eisenstadt's (2000) understanding on the relationship between multiple modernities and multiple nature of beliefs, deficient, and find support for Nisbet's (1966) proposition

that democratization and industrialization have an impact on religion. Beyer (1994, 2006) addresses religion in relation to globalization, departing from Luhmannian notions on culture and communication, and differentiation. Religion lost prime place to politics and economics and became a functional subsystem; it is to be analysed both 'locally' and globally. Casanova (1994, 2008), criticizing traditional theory of secularization, and granting unchurching, speaks of deprivatization. Does it differ from Bellah's (1967) civil religion in the USA, or Cipriani's (1989) diffused religion in Italy, where 'religion' permeates the public spheres; and does it counter the argument that religion has lost its authority in ethical discussions? No, not really.

Religion in postindustrial society

Some groupings, rooted in historic and early modern religion, strive for the preservation and/or reintroduction of the 'ancient' beliefs and practices. They selectively appropriate, transform and reinterpret various aspects of modernity (Altermatt, 2004). Hellemans (2004: 83) added that 'The anti-modernist modernisation of the Roman Catholic Church represents an exceptionally successful strategy'. Next, there are growing numbers of Evangelicals reaching salvation through the acceptance of Jesus as their saviour, an act on their own will, rejoicing modern-orthodox religion (Hak, 2006). Berger thinks 'the differences between two Catholics, one accepting the tradition without questioning, and the other being a sceptic, [are] greater than between a sceptic Protestant and a *ditto* Catholic (Vlasblom, 2005). In theory, the sceptical Catholic and the sceptical Muslim have more in common than they have with their orthodox fellow believers.'

Ter Borg (1991) and Bailey (1997, 1998), questioning the loss of religion in society, introduce implicit religion. It 'counterbalances the tendency to equate "religion" with specialized institutions, with articulated beliefs, and with that which is consciously willed (or specifically intended)' (Bailey, 1998: 235). They see religion in popular events such as sports and music manifestations, as does Hervieu-Léger (1993): in modernity, the sacred is not restricted to the religious domain, and may spring into existence in all domains. Supporters of a sports club jointly sharing experiences can create a sacral community which becomes religious when their memories assume the shape of a tradition; ritualized memory with connections to a past and the future, *la lignée croyante* ('the lineage of belief'). Pärna (2010, prop. 7) 'proposed that 'Any social phenomenon can be considered religious if it fulfills the following conditions: it inspires notions about the existence of forces or entities that transcend the

individual, gives rise to hope of great changes to life as we know it and holds the promise of surmounting human uncertainties and fragility.' Believing without belonging, i.e. 'non-institutionalized beliefs, personal "bricolage" and privatized conceptions of the sacred outside the Churches, Chapels and Mosques' (www.esareligion.org/bi-annual-conference/ accessed 30 May 2012), and hyper-real religions, 'innovative religions and spiritualities that mix elements of religious traditions with popular culture' (Possamai, 2012), can be added to the cart of 'newcomers'.

All these form variants of invisible religion, dubbed after *The Invisible Religion* (1967), as the translation of Luckmann's booklet *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft* ('The Problem of Religion in Modern Society') (1963) reads; in it Luckmann asserted that diminishing import of the churches for people did not mean that modern society was a-religious. Heelas et al. (2005) see a 'spiritual revolution' in which religion gives way to spirituality as individuals are living more and more in relationship to their individual subjective subsistence. Finally, liquid religion, spiritual and/or communal, is a result of liquid modernity in which individuality and community are experienced. Its forms are fluid and volatile, not hierarchically organized, and may come and go. All this will not be the end of the line. Echoing Geertz, the task is then not so much to define religion, but to find it. Where and in what (new) variants can it be found, and how to study these?

New religious movements

Since the Second World War, the speed and scope of social changes have been tremendous, e.g. with regard to communication technology, globalization, demography, education. Scholars point to these changes when discussing the decline of institutionalized religions in western society in the second half of the 20th century as well as the emergence of alternative spiritualities, sometimes within, but mostly outside religious institutions and, since the 1960s, the rise of large numbers of new religious movements (NRMs) (Beckford, 1986; Hunt, 2003; Robbins, 1988; Schäfer, 2008).

The reception of new religious movements in the western world varies substantially: in some countries, they are treated with indifference, in other countries they are met with overt or covert opposition by anti-cult organizations, the established churches, or the legal authorities (Arweck, 2006; Lucas and Robbins, 2004). Often biased and sensational reports in the media have shaped the public perception that they constitute a threat to traditional values and institutions, and that those who join must be mentally weak or brainwashed. NRM experts have discussed

the brainwashing issue widely, and have tried to correct the distorted public perception, however with little avail (Lewis, 2004). Because of the public discourse on these groups which diverge from mainstream religion as mind controlling agencies, scientists felt the need for a more neutral term. They came up with 'new religious movement'. For a long time the 'cult controversy' has been a predominant point on the research agenda of students of NRMs. More recently, attention has shifted to other more movement specific themes like movement organization, relation with the environment, conversion and doctrine.

The great variety with regard to size – where most have relatively limited numbers of followers, others are international enterprises being based in many counties (Beckford and Levasseur, 1986; Clarke, 2006) – history, theological tradition, organization, attitude towards society, makes it hard to give an all-embracing answer to the question why these movements have emerged. Generalizing statements referring to relative deprivation, alienation or anomie unfortunately have left the relationships between movement and society largely unspecified (Campbell, 1982: 236; Dawson, 2006). Consequently, there has been a shift from theories focusing on 'why' questions to theories focusing on 'how' questions, i.e. on the social processes through which religious movements create and maintain themselves (Zablocky and Looney, 2004: 314).

Qualitative research methods, like participant observation, dominate research on NRMs. By being part of the everyday life of (small) groups, the social scientist grows acquainted with their symbols and meanings and how these are constructed and interpreted. That is why students of NRMs in many instances have employed a symbolic interactionist perspective.

Research outcomes have unambiguously shown that affiliates to NRMs are neither brainwashed nor mentally weak, nor living on the margins of society. Attention has switched therefore to the question of how affiliation and conversion actually take place, instead of emphasizing personality traits of potential converts. Conversion is often considered as a career consisting of a number of stages of increasing involvement in religious movements. An frequently tested model is the seven-stage conversion model by Lofland and Stark (1965) who see conversion as a religious seeker's solution to personal problems connected to a turning point in life, facilitated by affective bonds and intensive interaction with members of the religious group. Not much empirical support for the turning point component of the model has been found, but the importance of (pre-)existing relationships and intensive interaction with

members of the movement has been established.

Disaffiliation got attention when scholars discovered that individuals were not only joining, but also leaving in great numbers (Bromley, 2004: 299). Causes for exiting are ascertained as geographical separation, competitive social networks, expulsion and questioning of the leader's authority when he/she does not live up to norms and promises. The last factor is of special importance in chiliastic movements when end-of-time prophecies are met with failure. Prophetic failure, however, need not be fatal to the movement. Much depends on the creativity of the prophet, the elasticity of the doctrine to absorb contradicting evidence and the material and spiritual investments made by the following. If the prophet cannot give an acceptable interpretation of the failing prophecy, disaffiliation can be collective as well as individual (Jansma, 1986, 2000; Stone, 2000).

The effects of exiting on individual members show a great variety, depending on how deeply they have been involved, and on how much they have invested in the movement. Most former members seem to be able to let movement experience behind them (Bromley, 2004: 305). Considering the effects of disaffiliation on the movement as a whole one has to realize that collective exiting has more impact than does the individual leaving, and that the effect of the exit of a high-ranking member, having inside information, can be more detrimental than that of a common member.

Regarding the societal significance of NRMs, the question has been raised as to whether they can compensate for the ongoing disenchantment-secularization trend of the western world. At first sight, the answer is negative. Whereas the numbers of quitters from institutionalized religions amount to the hundreds of thousands, only the following of the few largest NRMs can be counted in the ten thousands. This, however, is not the whole picture. There are large numbers of people nowadays who do not join any movement or church but define themselves as spiritual, belonging to a huge category of individuals who construct their own religion/philosophy of life. Even considering this category, one may doubt, as does for example Bruce (1996), whether new spirituality and NRMs can make up for the losses of institutionalized religion (Voas and Bruce, 2007).

Beckford and Levasseur (1986: 49), discussing the significance of NRMs in the western world, have concluded that their sociocultural contribution is modest, and the media attention of these mostly small groups stands in no proportion to the influence of their message on society. In their vision, 'the long term socio-cultural significance of today's NRMs lies less in their intended contributions to religious and spiritual life than in the unintended consequences of their activities for the clarification of the limits of toleration. ... NRMs are helping to define the practical boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable conduct in a supposedly secular age'. NRMs reveal what is seen in western society as 'normal' religious behaviour. In present-day secular society the content of a belief is not an important issue, what is seen as unacceptable conduct is when people take their beliefs so seriously that their whole daily life is organized in accordance to it (Hardin and Kehrer, 1982: 281; Jansma, 2010: 62).

Conclusion

Defining religion and magic will be with us for the foreseeable future. The usage of operational definitions, offering analytical sharpness and preciseness to the researcher, is nowadays prevalent in research. Yet, 'true' and reified definitions are still often encountered. (see also Asad, 1993; Fitzgerald, 2000; Lambert, 1991; McKinnon, 2002; Smith, 2004; Stark and Bainbridge, 1987 on defining religion). While the classic major scientific research programmes are a long way from being worn out, the rational choice turn, especially, has generated discussions, and more importantly, has generated the testing of old and new hypotheses and yielded novel facts.

Research on, inter alia, religious evolution, secularization and new religious movements has resulted in an ever-growing body of knowledge, tested hypotheses and improved research programmes. Then, it is hard to see the significance of the new concepts of religion as long as they are found in essays, i.e. non-theoretic-empirical based papers, and not subsumed under main questions, nor formulated as testable hypotheses. This same holds true for ponderings on the relationships between (reified) *modernity* and religion. How far do more philosophical and historical *angehauchte* scholars, and philosophical-theological discourses on religion, as for example in De Vries (2008), bring forth anything *sociologically* new? More importantly, in how far are their musings (e.g. Habermas, 2005; Taylor, 2007) relevant or find their way in theoretic empirical research of religion?

To achieve scientific progress, the issue is not so much a supposed division between qualitative and quantitative research, as some in periodic (pseudo-)debates will have it. The issue will be whether sociologists of religion subsume their research questions under the main questions, maybe the one and only main question – Ganzeboom (2012) argues that social cohesion subsumes both inequality and rationalization. Progress will only be achieved when

researchers answer explanatory research questions, either qualitatively or quantitatively, by testing hypotheses that are subsumed under scientific research programmes addressing the main question(s), and thus strengthening existing programmes or developing new ones.

Annotated further reading

For a general overview of the sociology of religion, see the following handbooks: Clarke PB (ed.) (2009) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Beckford JA and Demerath NJ (eds) (2007) *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. London: Sage.

On special themes like secularization, see Dobbelaere K (2002) *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels.* Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang; and see Tschannen O (1992) *Les Théories de la secularisation.* Genève and Paris: Librairie DROZ, for the history and the state of the debate of secularization at the time. Dobbelaere K (2009) The meaning and scope of secularization. In: Clarke PB (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 600–615, is more recent appreciation on secularization.

The state of the art on religious evolution is discussed in Bellah RN (2011) *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. Causal mechanisms for religious evolution are offered in Moor N, Ultee W and Need A (2009) Analogical reasoning and the content of creation stories: Quantitative comparisons of preindustrial societies. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 43: 91–122.

On the spiritual debate, see Flanagan K and Jupp PC (eds) (2007) *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Farnham: Ashgate. In this work the authors explore the problems of defining spirituality, the relationship of spirituality with among others gender, the holistic milieu, state, the Church, the post boomer generation.

O'Dea TF (1966) *Sociology of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. A classic study is a good example of the structural functionalist approach of religion.

Malinowski B (1974 [1925]) *Magic, Science and Religion*. London: Souvenir Press. These classic essays still make good reading for the understanding of magic, science and religion.

The first fully-fledged rational choice theory on religion is found in Stark R and Bainbridge WS (1987) *A Theory of Religion*. New York: Peter Lang. This milestone in the 'economic turn' in the sociology of religion was not so much revised in Stark R and Finke R (2000) *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, but is an outline of market theory applied to religion.

For an overview of new religious movements, see Lewis JR (ed.) (2004) *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*. Oxford and New York: Oxford

University Press. In this handbook, most main topics concerning new religious movements are covered: conversion, millennialism, anti-cult movements, the brainwashing debate. Furthermore the sociocultural significance of religious movements is discussed. Another good overview is given in Dawson LL (ed.) (2004) *Cults and New Religious Movements.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.

A short introduction to Lakatos's scientific research programmes, main sociological questions, etc., can be found at: www.socsci.kun.nl/maw/sociologie/ultee/presentations/bigcopenhagen.pps

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résumé   Un résumé des définitions de religion et de magie est suivi d'un aperçu des questions principales (inégalité, cohésion, rationalisation) et des principaux programmes de recherche scientifique (matérialisme historique, fonctionnalisme structurel, sociologie de l'individualisme interprétative, théorie du choix rationnel et théorie du marché religieux) où l'histoire du débat scientifique et le débat contemporain sont dépeints. Les résultats des recherches sur des sujets choisis: l'évolution des dieux, la sécularisation et le déclin de la pratique religieuse collective et des nouveaux mouvements religieux, sont présentés.

mots-clés   cohésion ◆ evolution religieuse ◆ inégalité ◆ nouveaux mouvements religieux ◆ rationalisation ◆ sécularisation

resumen   Un resumen de las definiciones de religión y magia es seguida por una especificación de las principales cuestiones (desigualdad, cohesión, racionalización) y los mayores programas de investigación científica (materialismo histórico, funcionalismo estructural, individualismo interpretativo, teoría de elección racional, teoría de mercado), en el que se delinea la historia del debate científico y el debate contemporáneo. Resultados de la investigación de temas seleccionadas se presentan: la evolución de los dioses, la secularización y el retroceso de la práctica religiosa colectiva, y los nuevos movimientos religiosos.

palabras claves   cohesión ◆ desigualdad ◆ evolución religiosa ◆ nuevos movimientos religiosos ◆ racionalización ◆ secularización