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introduction: a critical agenda

Putting together a book about the sociology of religion at the start of the twenty-first century is a daunting task, given the increasing importance of religion as a factor in world affairs and as a powerful influence in the lives of countless individuals – the great majority of the world’s citizens. It is bound to raise controversial as well as strategic issues. My task, however, is to produce a book about the sociology of religion and the debates within this particular sub-discipline, not to write a book about religion in the modern world per se – a significantly different enterprise. The difference, moreover, is crucial; it will have implications not only for our understanding of the subject matter, but for the argument of this book as a whole. The tension between global realities and sociological understanding is continually changing and will surface in almost every chapter.

The essential point can be put quite simply: why is it that the debates about religion in the modern world are so different from those that, until very recently, have predominated in the sub-discipline? What has caused this mismatch and how will it be overcome? For overcome it must be if we are to appreciate fully the significance of religion in the modern world order. Hence the subtitle of this book and the title of this chapter – the agenda is critical in that it calls into question, at times quite sharply, dominant ways of thinking. It is critical in a different sense given the paramount importance of religion in global affairs at the start of the new millennium.

The task, moreover, is urgent: we need to understand the ways in which religion, or more accurately religions, not only influence but are influenced by the behaviour of both individuals and collectivities (of all sizes), working on the principle that this will be the case in late modernity just as it has been in previous generations. Assuming the centrality of religion to late-modern societies is the key to what follows. More precisely this book is premised on the fact that, in global terms, it is as modern to draw on the resources of religion to critique the secular as it is to draw on the resources of the secular to critique the religious. Religion is not something that can be safely or sensibly relegated either to the past or to the edge.

The phrase ‘in global terms’ offers an important clue in this respect. Sociology, and within this the sociology of religion, has developed from a particular historical context – a set of circumstances which coloured not only the subject matter of the discipline but the tools and concepts which emerged in order to understand that context better. Hence, in the early days of sociology, a preoccupation with the upheavals taking place in Europe at the time of the industrial revolution and, as part and parcel of this, a sensitivity to the impact that these were having on the nature and forms of religious life in this part of the world. A pervasive, but ultimately false assumption gradually began to assert itself: namely that the process of modernization was *necessarily* damaging to religion. Exactly what form the damage might take and its possible consequences for individual and social life were major topics of debate, but its inevitability was increasingly taken for granted – unsurprisingly given the evidence surrounding the early sociologists. The traditional structures of religious life, deeply embedded in the economic and political order of pre-modern Europe, were crumbling visibly under the mutually reinforcing pressures of industrialization and urbanization.

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The process itself is significant for the development of sociology. Even more far-reaching, however, were the conceptual implications that came with it, as sociology looked for ways not only to describe but to explain the ‘damage’ being done. An overwhelming preoccupation with secularization as the dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion should be seen in this light; it emerged from the specificities of the European case in which it worked relatively well – an understanding of secularization was clearly important to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europeans. The next stage in the argument is, however, more difficult. The empirical connections present in Europe gradually – but inexorably – turned into theoretical assumptions, with the strong implication that secularization would necessarily accompany modernization whenever and wherever the latter occurred. More than this, Europe became the case against which all other cases were measured and, it is often implied, found wanting. The connections between modern and secular became normative. With this in mind, it becomes easier to understand why European sociologists, just as much as European journalists, have considerable difficulty accepting the fact that religion is, and remains, a profoundly normal part of the lives of the huge majority of people in the late-modern world.

The following anecdote illustrates this process perfectly. From 1998–2003, I took part in a working group associated with the World Council of Churches. The group was charged with understanding better the nature and forms of religion in the modern world, paying careful attention to

the implications of these changes for the future of the ecumenical movement.¹ About 10 of us met regularly over the five-year period, each individual representing a different part of the Christian world. The Europeans were in a minority. Two of our number (one from the Philippines and one from West Africa) each told the same story regarding the secularization paradigm. Both of them, educated in the late 1960s and 1970s, had been obliged to learn the ‘secularization thesis’ as part of their professional formation. Both of them knew from their own experience that the thesis was at best inappropriate, at worst simply wrong, a point of view overwhelmingly vindicated by subsequent events. But learn the thesis they had to – it was part of ‘proper’ education, necessary if they were to receive the qualifications essential for their respective careers. The empirical situation which they knew so well was simply put on one side: theory took precedence over data.

The anecdote raises many questions. Exactly what is meant by the secularization thesis is far from straightforward. Its various ramifications will form the substance of a key chapter in this book. So, too, the alternative perspectives that have emerged to replace this in different parts of the world. But the essence is clear enough: the sociology of religion has been dominated by a frame of reference which has its roots in a global region with a *particular*, as opposed to typical, experience of religion and religious change. A crucial part of the evolution of the sub-discipline lies (and will continue to lie) in its capacity to discern the implications of these beginnings for the formation of sociological thinking and to escape from them where necessary.

The last phrase is important. Not everything in or about the secularization thesis needs to be discarded. Important insights have emerged not only from the thesis itself, but also from the European context which need to be carried forward into the twenty-first century. One of these, paradoxically, is the aspect of secularization that the Europeans resisted for longest – the gradual separating out of different and more and more specialized institutions (political or educational, for example) as part of the modernizing process. Societal functions that were previously dominated by the church (education, healthcare, etc.) became increasingly autonomous. Once again, the detail of this discussion will be left until a later chapter. The key point to grasp at this stage is that institutional separation – a normal and ‘healthy’ part of modernization – need not bring with it either the marginalization of religion to the private sphere or the decline in religious activity (Casanova, 1994). Neither have occurred in most parts of the modern or modernizing world; nor are they likely to in the foreseeable future.

So much for the European context and its somewhat negative influence on the long-term development of the sociology of religion. Much

more positive from this point of view was the centrality of religion to the work of the early sociologists, not least the founding fathers. All of them (Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel) took religion seriously in their attempts to account for the changes taking place in the societies of which they were part. The different ways in which they did this form the substance of the following chapter. The close attention to religion on the part of social scientists was not, however, to last. In this respect, an essentially promising start gave way to what Beckford has termed a growing 'insulation and isolation' of the sociology of religion from its parent discipline (Beckford, 1989, 2003), a move which has been damaging in two respects. On the one hand, mainstream sociology has been rather too inclined to ignore both religion itself and the sociological debate that surrounds this. And on the other, sociologists of religion have withdrawn from mainstream sociological discussion, concentrating instead on the specificities of their own subject matter, whether empirically or theoretically.

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The over-preoccupation with secularization is part and parcel of this process. Why should mainstream sociology, or indeed any other discipline, take seriously a phenomenon which is reputedly disappearing as the modernization process takes its inevitable course? The residues and reactions to modernization that take a religious form may be of interest to the specialists in the field, but given their inevitably short-term nature they need not trouble the mainstream. Conversely a withdrawal by sociologists of religion from the central debates of sociology has meant a lack of engagement with the assumptions that accompany these discussions, not least the assumption that modernization necessarily implies secularization. The vicious circle intensifies – a chain of reactions that must be broken if progress is to be made.

The case for breaking the chain is, moreover, overwhelming if we are to respond adequately to the empirical realities of the modern world which, following Berger (1992), is 'as furiously religious as ever'. The facts are undeniable – they cover the world's press on a daily basis and will form the subject matter of the later chapters of this book. There is an equally urgent need to devise tools and concepts appropriate to the task. Both (facts and tools) will be easier to handle if contact with the parent discipline is encouraged. Much is to be gained, for example, from a better understanding of the modernization process in all its fullness, of which the complex and continuing relationships with religion are but one part. The same goes for globalization (see Chapter 10). A rather more domestic illustration can be found in the parallels between the religious field and other areas of society – a point that can be exemplified many times over in Britain. Institutional religion, at least in its traditional forms, is in trouble (a fact that is rarely disputed), but so are the corresponding institutions of political and economic life. That is the crucial

point. Both political parties and trade unions are struggling to maintain members (and therefore income) in exactly the same way as the mainstream churches. The reasons for these shifts lie primarily in the changing nature of economic and social life, the subject matter of mainstream sociology. Religious indifference is less important; it is, in fact, more likely to be the result than the cause of the institutional changes that are so clearly occurring.²

How then can we understand the changing nature of religion in the modern world in ways that build on what has gone before, but avoid the pitfalls of generalizing from a particular, but not necessarily typical, case? Will we all do this in the same way? Bearing this challenge in mind, the following paragraphs set out both a central theme and a set of variations. The theme is concerned with sociological approaches to religion, as opposed to those of other disciplines. The variations relate to the very different ways that the sociological task can be achieved. Specifically they pay careful attention to the situation in which the work takes place, a point already exemplified (albeit negatively) in the limitations that have emerged from the European context.

Rather more creative understandings will emerge as we try to determine how the agenda of the sociology of religion has been shaped by a wide variety of factors. The political/religious context in which the debate occurs is indeed important, but it is not the only influence. Others include the language restrictions (or opportunities) of the sociologists in question, their access to data, the requirements of the institutions in which they work (including political constraints), and crucially the subtle and ongoing relationships between observer and observed: that is, between the sociological community and the constituencies that form the primary object of their study. The agenda is not simply given; it becomes in itself something to be scrutinized – not least its capacity to be proactive as well as reactive. The ambiguous relationship between the nature and development of religiousness in the modern world and the interests of those who study it will become, in fact, a *fil conducteur* for this book as a whole. It is a vitally important issue if the sociology of religion is to flourish in the twenty-first century.

A THEME AND VARIATIONS: SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION

the theme

The discipline of sociology is about pattern; it is concerned both with the non-random ways that individuals, communities and societies order

their lives and with finding explanations for these ways of behaving. It follows that the sociology of religion aims to discover the patterns of social living associated with religion in all its diverse forms, and to find explanations for the data that emerge. It is not, in contrast, concerned with the competing truth claims of the great variety of belief systems that are and always have been present in human societies. That is the sphere of theology, with the relatively modern discipline of religious studies hovering, at times uneasily, in between.

It is hardly surprising that sociological distancing from ‘truth’ causes difficulties for some adherents of religion. Truth for the believer is absolute rather than relative, and any attempt to explain that some individuals or groups are, or appear to be, closer to the truth because of their socio-economic backgrounds (social class, age and gender, for example) is bound to provoke unease. The point is well taken, but it is important to grasp that the difficulty does not pertain only to the study of religion. Interestingly, it is equally problematic with respect to science – and the higher the view of ‘science’ or scientific knowledge, the worse the problem is likely to be. Or to put the same point in a different way, advocates of the superiority of science over religion have exactly the same problem as religious believers when it comes to sociology. Both resist a discipline which is concerned more with the context and institutional attachments of adherents than with the status of the knowledge or belief system as such. No one makes this point more forcefully than Mary Douglas:

When the scientist has a very serious message to convey he faces a problem of disbelief. How to be credible? This perennial problem of religious creed is now a worry for ecology. Roughly the same conditions that affect belief in a denominational God affect belief in any particular environment. Therefore in a series of lectures on ecology, it is right for the social anthropologist to address this particular question. We should be concerned to know how beliefs arise and how they gain support. (Douglas, 1982: 260)

A further point follows from this. To indicate that the many and varied aspects of religious life form patterns does not imply that they are *caused* by the different variables that appear to correlate with them. For example, to observe that in large parts of the Christian West women appear to be more religious than men implies neither that all women are necessarily religious, nor that no men are. Women, just like men, are free to choose their degree of religiousness. Even a limited scrutiny of the data reveals, however, that the choices of women with respect to religion in the Western world (whether in terms of belief or of practice) are markedly different from those of men. This is an obvious and pervasive example of pattern in Western societies. *Why* this should be so moves us inevitably to the level

of explanation, and in more ways than one. We have indeed to consider why it is that women appear to be more religious than men; we also have to consider why the difference was ignored for so long in the sociological literature. Both points will be dealt with in Chapter 11.

An additional danger needs firm underlining before going further. Sociologists must resist the temptation to subsume the study of religion into alternative, and for some at least more congenial, areas of interest. This has happened in the past (all too often) and has impeded understanding. It is in fact a further, if indirect, consequence of a tendency to think primarily in terms of secularization. So doing implies that the presence, rather than the absence, of religion in the modern world requires an explanation. Why is it still there? One way round this 'problem' lies in arguing that what appears to be religion is 'really something else', the principal suspects being ethnicity and nationalism. These are the real issues to be tackled; religion is simply an epiphenomenon masking the realities of a world necessarily dominated, if the protagonists of secularization are correct, by forces other than religion.

The global situation is changing, however. It is becoming more and more difficult to ignore the presence of religion in the modern world or to claim that this is really something else. Two defining moments in this respect occurred towards the end of the twentieth century. The first, in 1979, brought religion centre stage in a particularly dramatic way. The date that the British remember as the beginning of the Thatcher era coincided, give or take a month or two, with the year in which Karol Wojtyla became Pope and the Shah of Iran fled before the Ayatollah. Across the globe, there was a conservative reaction in more ways than one (economic, political and religious), a change associated with the decline in secular confidence so dominant in the 1960s. The implications for the sociology of religion are immense and will be spelled out in detail in the chapters that follow. The second, precisely 10 years later, engendered a further shift in perspective. An understanding of global politics based on ideology, the essence of the Cold War, has given way to a politics centred on identity (or identities) within which religion finds a natural place (Sacks, 2002). Samuel Huntington's celebrated 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1993, 1997) articulates this shift, offering ample space for religion in the ensuing debate. The controversial nature of this work lies in Huntington's conceptualization of civilizational (and within this religious) relationships as a 'clash' rather than a dialogue. Unsurprisingly, the potential for conflict – and especially that between Islam and its neighbours – has caught the attention of public as well as professional commentators; it has become, rightly or wrongly, a pervasive frame of reference.

Scholars of many disciplines must come to terms with these changes, the more so since the shock of 9/11 ensured that they remained central to the world's agenda. Rather more modestly there is an urgent need for sociologists of religion to take responsibility in this field and, where necessary, to challenge 'the clash'. They are, or should be, motivated by a common task: the better understanding of the place of religion in the ordering (patterning) of human societies and on a global scale. How then do sociologists, including sociologists of religion, go about their work in practice? Runciman (1983) offers a helpful, and in essence very simple, response to this question, elaborating four separate but overlapping dimensions to the sociological role. He uses the following terms to introduce these: reportage, explanation, description and evaluation or policymaking.

Runciman begins with reportage: that is, the gathering of as much information as possible and in a wide variety of ways. Chapter 6 on the different methodologies available to the sociologist of religion will expand these opportunities further, demonstrating the range of data on which it is possible to draw and how these sources can be used to maximum advantage. But sociologists do more than this: they seek to explain as well as to report their data, explanations that take many different forms. What, for example, are the connections between religious vitality and religious pluralism? Is it the case that the latter undermines the former, or is religious life stimulated by diversity? Chapters 3 and 4 offer alternative understandings of this important issue. At the same time, such understandings raise questions about causality and correlation; patterns that appear to coincide are not necessarily related to each other by causal links.

Runciman uses his third term 'description' in a somewhat specialized sense. By this he means an attempt to describe what it is like for the individuals and groups involved in religious or indeed other activities; in other words, seeing what is happening through the eyes of the religious actor. A major challenge in this respect lies in the capacity to 'understand' a world view which challenges, sometimes very profoundly, the values of the observer. Is it possible, for instance, to empathize with views that appear to run counter to principles of Western democracy? The answer must be 'yes', but requires at times both effort and imagination, a point underlined in Chapter 6. The fourth and final aspect of the sociological task concerns its more practical applications. Sociologists are invited to suggest policies which might boost the membership of an ailing institution or, alternatively, reduce the possibility of religious conflict. The likelihood of differing views, and therefore different policies, is however almost unavoidable. Policy after all will relate very closely to

explanation; disagreements about the latter (why the conflict takes place) very quickly turn into disagreements about the former (how it might be resolved).

All four of these elements will emerge in the chapters that follow. Not all of them will be followed through in each case, but the framework set out here provides a useful guide to the territory.

variations on the theme

Before embarking definitively, however, a rather different point requires attention; it lies in the diversity of resources available to the sociologist as he or she sets about the task or tasks already outlined. The question can be asked in a variety of ways. At one end of the scale are the intellectual (including linguistic) constraints; at the other lie a range of institutional issues – bearing in mind the inevitable overlap between them. Intellectual constraints find expression in distinctive institutional settings; institutions epitomize ‘schools of thought’, which in turn become self-perpetuating.

There is no need to go far in the sociology of religion – an international conference will suffice – without becoming aware of the very different intellectual *formations* (to use a French term) encountered in the sub-discipline. Scholars of religion are exposed not only to different theoretical frameworks but to different academic traditions which relate, in their turn, both to linguistic boundaries (who can access what?) and even more profoundly to the philosophies that underpin the discipline. The bodies of knowledge that build up in different places embody significantly different approaches to the subject matter, quite apart from divergent interests and skills. The implications for academic exchange are considerable. It is unreasonable, for instance, to expect a natural convergence between a French sociologist of religion – influenced from an early age by Cartesian philosophy, schooled in the classics of French sociology of religion (see Chapter 2) and preoccupied with essentially French debates about *laïcité* – and his or her American equivalent, who draws from Anglo-Saxon literature and Anglo-Saxon empiricism in order to understand better the implications of American voluntarism in the religious field. Both will have to work hard if an effective dialogue is to take place – the whole point of the international conference.

Add to this the fact that each of these scholars may be working in a very different institutional environment and the possibilities for misunderstanding multiply. This is true even within Europe, let alone between old world and new. In the Nordic countries, for example, the sociology

of religion is almost always found in faculties of theology (now broadened to include religious studies in addition to philosophy, anthropology and sociology of religion). In France, in contrast, the teaching of religion as such is proscribed from state-funded universities just as it is from public schools. The sociology of religion has grown from a very different environment; hence the need to distance itself from its Catholic roots in pastoral sociology. The Catholic universities of continental Europe are different again – offering their own combination of restriction and opportunity, as indeed do the pastoral institutes of the relatively wealthy German churches which produce data sets unheard of in Britain, but not always in ways that assist the sociologist. All of these, moreover, contrast sharply with their counterparts in North America, where the implications of the First Amendment sit alongside the opportunities for financial support that come from private as well as public foundations – remembering, of course, that private funding bodies have institutional requirements of their own. The grass on the other side of the fence is not always greener, though in funding terms it sometimes appears so.

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The examples multiply the further afield one goes. Particularly interesting are the venues for scholarship establishing themselves in the post-communist world, as the lifting of restrictions in the religious field itself are accompanied by attempts to understand this better and to track the debates specific to the region – not least careful attention to religious freedom and how this should be interpreted in countries that have emerged from Soviet control. The answers are far from straightforward. Constructing an appropriate body of theory becomes an essential part of the task in an environment dominated for several generations by a philosophy that, officially at least, proscribed religion altogether. Attempts to emerge from this past are moderately well advanced in much of central and East Europe (though more so in some places than in others);³ the Chinese case will be the one to watch in the early decades of the twenty-first century.⁴

Intellectual traditions and their associated institutions offer one route into this debate. Another lies in the religious organizations themselves: first, in their capacity to employ professionally trained sociologists, but second, in their willingness to contribute – in other words, to lay themselves open to sociological enquiry. How do they regard the social scientist: as potential friend or probable foe? Voyé and Billiet (1999) offer an interesting range of case studies in this respect. Most of these are European, but not quite all: they include some tentative remarks on the possibilities for the sociological study of Islam and on the study of new

religious movements in Japan. The title and sub-title of this volume – *Sociology and Religions: An Ambiguous Relationship* – catch something of the complexities involved. The relationships are multiple; so too are the associated ambiguities as different faith communities react differently to the social-scientific observer and to the findings that emerge from the latter’s enquiries – a point that will be discussed in more detail at the end of Chapter 6.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Bearing such considerations in mind, this book will be structured as follows. It is divided into two halves: the first half will deal primarily with theory and method within the sub-discipline, and the second with a range of substantive issues. Quite clearly the two overlap; they should be thought of as different approaches to a single body of material rather than discrete or free-standing enterprises.

part I

Chapter 2 begins, predictably enough, with some discussion of the founding fathers and the importance of religion to their thinking. Following the approaches already set out, careful attention will be paid to the European context and the manner in which this influenced their work, albeit in different ways. The second section takes a rather different turn and illustrates the distinctive paths that sociology, and within this the sociology of religion took in the next generation as American influences began to dominate in the English-speaking world. A markedly different sociological ‘canon’ emerges on each side of the Atlantic, the more so given the dominance of the French (and French speakers) in European developments. The rather special place of the British contribution forms a central section within this chapter. As English speakers, the British draw extensively on the American sources. The context in which they work is, however, closer to their relatively secular continental neighbours than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts across the Atlantic. Debates centred on American voluntarism do not translate easily into European terms. Britain turns out, in fact, to be a hybrid case: institutionally it is pulled in one direction, linguistically in another.

The core of the theoretical discussion lies, however, in three longish chapters each with a different theme. The first of these (Chapter 3) is

devoted to secularization and begins with the essentially European genesis of the concept and its inherent ambiguities. Secularization is (and always has been) a term with multiple meanings, each of which needs separating out if we are to avoid unnecessary confusions. That is the first task. The second lies in outlining the positions of the different contributors to the debate, paying particular attention to the comparative aspects of their work. By and large the scholars who have paid more attention to the ways in which the process of secularization has occurred in different parts of the world are less likely to commit themselves to the inevitability of what is happening.

The third section of this chapter reflects a more radical change. The whole notion of secularization has come under attack in recent years as the empirical data began to suggest that the assumption of secularization as the most likely outcome of modernization might be incorrect. Not everyone has been persuaded by this argument. Indeed it is important to think carefully about what can and what cannot be sustained in terms of secularization given the unexpected (at least for some) resurgence of religion in the modern world. This is not an all-or-nothing situation. Particular attention will be paid to the work of Peter Berger, which spans three to four decades. In the 1960s Berger was a major contributor to the idea of secularization, paying careful attention to the ways in which modern people believe. Some 40 years later his views are markedly different. In many ways Berger's earlier intuitions (especially those in *The Heretical Imperative*, 1980) were correct; the consequences, however, were not those that he initially anticipated.

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Rational choice theory (RCT) is to America what secularization theory is to Europe. It offers an alternative approach to religion in the modern world and leads in a very different direction. Once again the stress will lie on the 'fit' between context and theory, exemplifying on one hand the 'gloriously American' nature of RCT but on the other its necessary limitations if used indiscriminately. With this in mind, an important section of Chapter 4 will emphasize the differences between Europe and America, looking carefully at religious mentalities as well as religious institutions. Suggesting changes at the level of institutions is one thing, changing mentalities, religious or secular, is quite another. It is at this level that we find the real resistance to RCT in the European context. Europeans do not, for the most part, regard their religious institutions as competing firms in a religious market from which they can choose the product that offers the best deal (the economic language is deliberate); they regard them as 'public utilities' – there at the point of need for a population that delegates to someone else, historically the state, the responsibility for maintaining that institution until the need arises.

The last section of this chapter turns briefly to Latin America, suggesting that an essentially European (Latin) pattern, established here in the sixteenth century, may be gradually mutating into something closer to the American model. These paragraphs pay particular attention to a more specialized application of RCT; they are concerned with the choices open to the Catholic Church (rather than to the religious believer) in two very different Latin American countries, as church leaders devise policies which aim to retain or recapture the loyalties of the mass of the population – itself seduced by religious as well as secular alternatives. The exponential growth of Pentecostalism in this part of the world becomes a crucial factor in the somewhat delicate equations that surround these attempts to make policy.

The third theoretical chapter (Chapter 5) scrutinizes the concept of modernity and its application to the understanding of religion. This is done in two ways. The first section draws from the concluding chapter of my own *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Davie, 1994), which developed in some detail the shifts from pre-modern, through modern, to postmodern, explaining how each of these approaches offers different opportunities and/or difficulties for religion. The material is approached first in terms of the structural opportunities and constraints; the cultural equivalents follow. The later sections of the chapter draw from a book published almost a decade later, *Europe: the Exceptional Case* (Davie, 2002a), in which the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ provides the theoretical frame. Here the emphasis lies on the very different natures of modernity in different parts of the world. The key theorist in this respect is Shmuel Eisenstadt from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The period between the two books (1994–2002) has seen a transformation in the religious agenda. No longer is the necessarily secular and Western nature of modernity, in the singular, so readily assumed: modernities are multiple and only some of these, the minority in fact, embody the notion of secularization.

Chapter 6 on methodology completes the first half of the book. The emphasis here lies on diversity. There are many ways to collect sociological data, the great majority of which are complementary. The chapter acknowledges the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods but indicates how they can be brought together to build a more complete picture. It is important to grasp from the outset what a particular way of working is likely to produce in the way of data and what it is unreasonable to expect. Large-scale surveys of the population, for example, will yield little material about minorities apart from their existence. In order to investigate the minority in more detail, it will be necessary to effect a rather different kind of enquiry, frequently combining

a more focused survey with qualitative methodology. The increasing range of possibilities in terms of qualitative work forms an important part of this discussion.

The chapter ends with a short note on cognate disciplines, bringing together a number of ideas already introduced, not least the need to explain as well as establish sociological data. Different disciplines contribute different insights in this respect. Within this broadly interdisciplinary framework, the tension between theological and social scientific approaches to religious life is developed in some detail, given the controversial nature of some recent exchanges in this field.

part II

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The second half of the book concentrates on a number of substantive themes. Selecting and prioritizing these has not been easy, the more so given the evident mismatch between the realities of the modern world and the nature of the sociological agenda. Which of these should dictate the subject matter and what exactly should be included? The following choices require some explanation. They are restricted, first of all, to post-war debates, noting that many of these necessarily reflect earlier concerns. Bearing this in mind, the selected topics should be viewed as points of entry into a complex agenda. Their presentation is chronological, broadly speaking, taking as a guideline the order in which the issues concerned became significant in sociological debate.

This is not meant to imply that one debate stops and another begins as the decades pass – the issues run concurrently as the agenda gradually gathers steam. They also overlap. What is mainstream in one context may not be so in another; ‘Western’ positions are reversed in many parts of the world. Fashions, moreover, come and go – certain issues lie dormant for a bit before reviving, sometimes in new forms. They also move about. The debate about new religious movements provides an excellent illustration of the latter. It first emerges in the 1960s within the relative pluralism of the Anglo-Saxon world; its recent impact, in contrast, is most noticeable in France and in the former communist countries. The agenda has altered accordingly and will be examined from several points of view. If there is an underlying thread to the chapters as a whole, it lies in the gradual, if somewhat belated, escape from the preoccupations of the West to a more global perspective; the demands on the practitioner are correspondingly increased.

In the immediate post-war period, both European and American scholars were primarily concerned with what, for them, were mainstream

churches, but for different reasons (Chapter 7). Europeans (and notably the French) were aware of decline, whereas Americans were trying to account not only for the diversity of their religious institutions but also for their continuing vitality. In Europe, moreover, there is a certain nostalgia about this period – it embodied in many places (and notably in Britain) an attempt to reconstruct the patterns of pre-war life and the place of the churches within this. Such nostalgia came to an abrupt end in the 1960s, a decade that turned almost everything (institutional and cultural) on its head, including the churches. It is at this point, moreover, that the mainstream churches of Europe begin to haemorrhage at a truly alarming rate, particularly in the North. The degree to which the Catholic churches of Latin Europe were likely to follow suit, and when, became an important topic of discussion. Hence all over the continent, a renewed and justifiable preoccupation with secularization.

American sociologists were undoubtedly influenced by these ideas, not least a taken-for-granted incompatibility between religion and urbanization. Cox (1968), for example, in an influential text simply assumes the secularity of the modern city. Bit by bit, however, the American data assert themselves: the statistics of church attendance were not falling in the same way that they were in Europe and the phenomenon of the New Christian Right (conspicuous by its absence in Europe) was beginning to make an impact on political life. In terms of institutional church life, the gap between the United States and Europe was, if anything, getting wider. It is at this point that we rejoin the theoretical debate, as rational choice theory gradually, and entirely understandably, replaces secularization as the dominant paradigm in the United States. In recent decades, it has been supported by key studies on American voluntarism such as Ammerman (1997, 2005) or Livezey (2000).

Turn of the twenty-first century work in Europe reveals a complex picture. A series of large-scale empirical studies⁵ yielded useful comparative data on the place of religion, including the historic churches, in European societies. On the one hand, these data affirm the decline of the mainstream; on the other, they reveal *both* the relative tenacity of certain forms of religious activity *and* the gradual emergence of new forms of religious belonging. The pattern is changing: European populations are beginning to opt in rather than out of their churches – a shift which introduces noticeably different attitudes and approaches. Membership is increasingly chosen; it is no longer assumed or ascribed. The comparisons with the United States are important in this respect: is Europe becoming more like America in its religious life, or is this an authentic and distinctively European mutation?

We need, however, to return to the 1960s and to appreciate the change that the associated upheaval brought to the sociological agenda. It was at this point that the interest in alternative forms of religion began to assert itself, a tendency that came almost to dominate the sub-discipline. Its implications for the sociology of religion are discussed in Chapter 8. There are those, for example, who see in the study of new religions a tendency to marginalization (i.e. self-marginalization) taken to an extreme. There are others who discover in new religious movements the potential for new connections with the sociological mainstream – through, for instance, the work on new social movements of which religious movements are but one example. Whatever the position taken one point is abundantly clear: the amount of work on new religious movements is disproportionate to the numbers involved in the movements themselves, which for the most part remain very small.

Why then has the debate provoked so much interest, and in public as well as sociological life? One reason for this lies in the issues raised by new forms of religious life – not least the question of religious liberty. Beckford (1985) is entirely correct to indicate that new religious movements act as ‘barometers’ of more general social change. We learn as much about ourselves as about the religious movements as such as we examine their position in society. The essential question is straightforward enough: which forms of religion are acceptable and which are not? And in which societies in particular? The latter point becomes central to the whole debate: not all societies (even within Western Europe) react in the same way. Why not? The discussion concludes with a detailed examination of the French case, drawing largely on the work of Hervieu-Léger (2001a). Her study is seminal: it reveals the essence of Frenchness just as much as it informs the reader about the sects (the French prefer this term) that exist in France and the difficulties that they face.

The later sections of this chapter indicate a step change. They are concerned with the growing presence of other faith communities in Europe, revealing an obvious possibility for convergence with mainstream sociology. Debates about race, ethnicity and racism have been prominent in sociological discourse, but have failed very frequently to take the religious factor into account. The situation is changing, however – a shift brought about by the transformations in the global context already described. Ignoring either the presence of religion in the modern world or its penetrations into Western societies is becoming increasingly difficult to do. In the 1990s critically important debates concerning both took place in Britain and France: in Britain, the Rushdie controversy raised crucial issues for the understanding of modern forms of religion;

in France the *affaire du foulard* provided the catalyst. In the new millennium, the Dutch, Danish, Swiss and Swedish cases have moved centre stage; equally important and rather more alarming is the question of religious terrorism.

None of these cases can be separated from what is happening world-wide. Once again 1979 turns out to be a key date, as much for the sociology of religion as for the transformation in world politics. It is at this point, moreover, that the study of fundamentalism (or more accurately fundamentalisms) begins to gather momentum (Chapter 9). In some respects, such initiatives mark a step forward for the sociological agenda: no longer are the religious forms under review those of the West (at least not exclusively). But in others, they are almost a step back: the study of religion in the modern world becomes essentially the study of something negative – fundamentalism is seen primarily as an anti-modern reaction. The basic incompatibility between being religious and being modern is still very largely assumed.

An immense amount of work was done in the field, however, epitomized in the Fundamentalism Project centred in the University of Chicago. It is impossible to ignore the five enormous volumes emanating from this enterprise, if only to take issue with some (by no means all) of the findings. The genesis and content of the project will be described in some detail. Equally interesting, however, are the gradual shifts in perspective, as it becomes clear that fundamentalisms are as much an expression of modernity as they are a reaction to this. For the second time, the work of Eisenstadt (1999) will be central to the argument. For Eisenstadt, fundamentalist movements are not eruptions of traditional or pre-modern forces; they constitute distinctive, modern, political movements – a type, moreover, with strong Jacobin tendencies. The content of their ideologies may be anti-modern, or more specifically anti-enlightenment, but the manner and means through which they are constructed are quintessentially modern. A range of empirical examples will illustrate the point.

Similar questions will be engaged in Chapter 10 on globalization, a discussion which deals both with the theoretical dimensions of the debate and the place of religion within these. Markedly different perspectives immediately become clear. A great deal depends, in fact, on how globalization itself is conceptualized. Is this a powerful, unstoppable, economic force, sweeping everything – including religion – before it? Or is it something far more complex embodying all kinds of economic and social movements some of which go with the economic flows and some of which resist them? If the latter view is taken religion becomes inseparable from it and can be found on both sides of the equation. Religion, for example, is intimately linked with transnational migrations (the movement of labour), new social

movements (transnational NGOs), new understandings of gender and the struggles for economic justice, all of which are part and parcel of the globalization process. Religion, however, can also act as a resistor, providing fresh understandings of identity – whether national, ethnic, gendered, generational or simply religious – for those who feel threatened by the pace of global change.

The chapter includes a wide variety of illustrations, both Christian and other, using as its take-off point the undeniably global reaction to the death of John Paul II. More generally this discussion is concerned with the very marked shifts that are taking place in historic forms of Christianity, taking the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion as examples. In terms of membership the weight of both these churches now lies in the Southern hemisphere, a fact with considerable importance for the religious agendas that will be pursued in the twenty-first century. The numbers moreover are huge, dwarfing the constituencies ‘back home’. A parallel illustration can be found in Pentecostalism, the form of Christianity which is growing fastest in the modern world. So far this too is a religion of the global South, growing exponentially in Latin America in the 1960s, spreading to Africa a decade or so later, and by the 1990s to the Pacific Rim. The potential for expansion in the last of these, not least in China, is immense.

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The discussion ends with two studies of Islam (Turkey and Indonesia), chosen specifically to balance the more conservative (fundamentalist) illustrations found in the previous chapter. They concentrate on the possibility that there might be an authentic Muslim modernity – or indeed more than one; in other words, on forms of Islam that fit relatively easily into the modern world but which remain distinct from their Western counterparts. The resonance with the idea of *multiple* modernities is immediately clear.

Chapter 11 is rather different. It takes up a number of themes not so far engaged, many of which resonate with the preoccupations of anthropology rather than sociology. Such topics include the manifest differences between men and women, the continuing importance of religion to the life-cycle, and the increasing overlap between religion and health (encapsulated in the idea of well-being). The last of these is interesting in many ways. Theoretically it challenges even the dimension of the secularization thesis which is easiest to accept (see p. 3) – that of institutional separation. Whilst it is clear that healthcare in the modern West is primarily the responsibility of the state, the emergence of alternative forms of medicine have begun to erode this autonomy. The evolution of childbirth from pre-modern, through modern (a highly medicalized model) to postmodern (a reaction to excessive medicalization) exemplifies

this process perfectly. The space for religion, or in this case spirituality, shifts accordingly.

Recent work on death and dying has become almost a sub-discipline in its own right. After decades of silence, comparable to the Victorian distaste for talking about sex, both society and sociologists have become increasingly preoccupied with the greatest mystery of all: what happens to us when we die? The work of Walter (1990, 1994, 1995) has been seminal in this area, describing the evolution in death and death practices from traditional, through modern to neo-modern societies. Beneath his analysis, however, lies a powerful sub-text: both the dying and the grieving individual must be considered as a person, not simply a bundle of symptoms or sorrows. The argument is driven to a provocative conclusion, challenging yet again both the institutional arrangements of modern societies and the theoretical assumptions that go with these. Increasing specialization is obliged to give way as 'holy' and 'whole' reacquire their common root. The set-apart, or the sacred, becomes integral to the well-being of both individual and collective life. Religion is rediscovered at the turning points of life.

The concluding chapter (Chapter 12) returns to a theme set out at the outset: namely the noticeably imperfect relationship between the debates of the sub-discipline and the realities of the modern world. A central question emerges in these discussions: who precisely sets the agenda, and for whom? And, more searchingly, is the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion adequately prepared for the tasks that will confront it in the twenty-first century? If not, how is it possible to 'do better'? The changing nature of sociology as well as the sociology of religion itself will be central to this crucially important discussion.

A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

It is customary to begin a textbook in the sociology of religion with a chapter, or at least a section of a chapter, on definitions of religion and the debate that ensues from the difficulties in this area. Excellent accounts of these issues exist in a number of places and need not be repeated here.⁶ The following paragraphs aim simply to make one or two essential points – essential, that is, for the arguments that follow.

There are two ways of defining religion in terms of its relationship to society. The first is *substantive*: it is concerned with what religion *is*. Religion involves beliefs and practices which assume the existence of supernatural beings. The second approach is *functional*: it is concerned with what religion *does* and how it affects the society of which it is part.

For example, religion offers solutions to otherwise unanswerable questions (what happens when we die?), or religion binds people together in distinctive forms of collective action. The tension between the two types of definition has existed from the first days of sociology. Max Weber worked from a substantive point of view; Emile Durkheim developed a functionalist perspective.

Each standpoint has advantages and disadvantages. Substantive definitions limit the field to beliefs or activities which involve supernatural entities or beings. Such a limitation is helpful in that the boundaries are easier to discern, but even a preliminary survey will reveal the amazing diversity of forms that the supernatural can take in human society. More particularly, non-Western forms of the supernatural often sit uneasily within frames of reference which derive from Western culture. These are practical difficulties. The sharpest critique of substantive definitions comes, however, from those sociologists who maintain that the presence of the supernatural (however described) should not be the defining feature of religion. Such an emphasis is likely to exclude a whole range of activities or behaviour which – to the participants at least – take on the character of ‘sacred’ even if the supernatural as such is not involved. Any ideology, for instance, which addresses the ultimate problems of existence could be thought of as a religion, whether or not it makes reference to the supernatural. Ecological or green movements provide topical examples at the start of the twenty-first century. Also included are certain forms of nationalism which undoubtedly provide collective frames of meaning and powerful inspiration for the populations involved, even if the goals remain firmly of this world rather than the next.

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Where, though, can the line be drawn once the need for a supernatural element within the definition of religion has been discarded? This is the crucial problem with functional definitions and it remains for the most part unresolved. Once the gold standard, in the form of the supernatural, has been abandoned, it is very difficult to draw any precise or undisputed boundary about what should or should not be included in the sociological study of religion.

There have been various attempts to square the circle and to synthesize the two types of definition. Hervieu-Léger (2000) offers one of these; it solves some problems but undoubtedly creates others (Davie, 2000a: 31). Much more penetrating in this respect is Hervieu-Léger’s more recent work on sects in France, where she demonstrates how the definition of ‘religion’ as a concept colours the whole understanding of the question. Herein lies the clue to the French problem: both the Catholic Church and its alter ego, the secular state, have immense difficulty comprehending forms of religion which do not correspond with the French

understanding of the term. Paradoxically the Catholic model of religion is exerting itself strongly in one of the most secular societies of the world. It is this, moreover, that goes to the heart of the matter. It is possible to talk ad infinitum about the nature/definitions of religion and the pros and cons of different approaches without once engaging reality. We need, though, to be sharply aware of the tools and concepts that we are using (including definitions) and the baggage that they carry. Only then can effective debate begin. In bringing this essentially constructivist argument to our attention, Beckford (2003) offers an excellent starting point for this book as well as for his own.

NOTES

1 The findings of this working party can be found in De Santa Ana (2005); see also the discussion of the World Council of Churches in Chapter 10.

2 The similarity between religious and secular behaviour can be seen in other ways as well. In the Nordic countries, for example, nominal membership remains high in both the churches and the trade unions. In Britain both have fallen. Putnam (1995, 2000) deals with the American case. See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of these questions.

3 The work and publications of the International Study of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe Association (ISORECEA) are important in this respect. See www.isorecea.net for more information (accessed 3 April 2012).

4 See in this context the special issue of *Social Compass* on 'Religions in contemporary China' (50/4, 2003) and Yang (2005, 2011).

5 These studies, notably the European Values Surveys, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

6 One of the best of these expositions can be found in Blasi (1998).

