

# Religion as Site Rather Than Religion as Category: On the Sociology of Religion's Export Problem

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*The sociology of religion is not well known for exporting theory to other subdisciplines, for which the author suggests three causes: a lack of interest in religion from other sociologists, a focus on "normal science" rather than exportable theory, and an insistence that religion is a sui generis analytic category. The author then suggests how this third cause can be remedied by no longer thinking of religion as an analytic category but rather as a site though which religious actors can be studied. Doing so would shift religion to a pragmatic, native category, thereby allowing an easier export of concepts discovered while studying religious groups, in the tradition of sociological classics like taboo and charismatic authority.*

*Key words:* theory; politics; culture; definition of religion; categories; classical theory.

Fairly or not, the sociology of religion is usually considered a provincial sub-discipline. While researchers in other subdisciplines might look for usable theory in comparative-historical, cultural, or organizational sociology, they do not often turn to the sociology of religion. Why not? This is obviously an empirical question, and one I am not now able to answer empirically, but I have three hunches: one about our past, one about how we are regarded, and one about how we go about thinking, talking about, and using the word *religion*. It is this third hunch that I want to focus on here, as it is my argument that the category of religion often does more harm than good, mostly because it obscures the relevance of our findings for fellow sociologists, but also because it can often obscure our work in and of itself.

In the rest of this paper, I will briefly go over my hunches about why we have a theory export problem in the sociology of religion, emphasizing primarily the

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difficulties with the category of religion. I will then outline some of the critiques of the category and then some of the responses from within religious studies and the broader social scientific study of religion. I will suggest that while recent attempts to reformulate the definition of religion have a tremendous amount of promise, sociologists of religion should nonetheless abandon any commitment to the category of religion as a thing in itself or as a project worth exploring. I will then suggest that while we need not study “religion” as a category, we certainly should continue to study religions as empirical sites. Of course, to study religious sites, we need to know which of them are religious, thereby returning to the problem at hand: I suggest that in these cases, a pragmatic definition—religion is what our respondents say religion is—is most suitable. Obviously, there are things religious people do that nonreligious people do not: prayer, for example, or reverence for scripture. Yet I will argue that even these seemingly unique characteristics are occluded by insisting on religion as its own category, and can be understood as examples or ideal types of much broader cultural processes. I therefore close the paper by describing how prayer and scripture might be understood as useful “exports” from the sociology of religion.

In sum, the definition of religion is necessarily either too broad or too narrow, and we would do better to abandon the analytic category, instead using the word only as a native category to study what self-described religious people do, thereby creating important (and exportable) concepts for the rest of sociology. I therefore suggest that we use religion as a site, by which I mean *a location at which we can observe social life*, rather than as a category, by which I mean *a term that provides definitive analytical distinctions between what is religious and what is not*.

### THREE HUNCHES

My first hunch about why we cannot export more of our theoretical work is that a lot of other sociologists simply are not that interested in religion. Despite various scholars having proven secularization theory wrong-headed—even Peter Berger, one of its most important proponents, has acknowledged its shortcomings (1999)—the theory seems to have been a fairly accurate predictor of religion’s declining importance for sociologists. Gone are the days when Marx, Weber, and Durkheim felt as though religion was something they simply *had* to deal with. Many contemporary scholars (e.g., Habermas 2010; Stout 2004; Taylor 2007) have made the case that, in our postsecular world, religion still has to be acknowledged, but for whatever reasons, many sociologists disagree. Religion—whether as an empirical reality, a sociological problem, or simply an important variable—often simply does not show up, and I think that absence is at least partially because it is not a salient part of sociologists’ own lives or interests (unlike, say, gender, class, or race).

My second hunch is that the sociology of religion is unsure of the degree to which it wants institutional coherence. Probably, the best example of a fully

coherent sociological subdiscipline in the sociology of education. (Criminology is even more coherent, though to such an extent you could argue it is a separate field and not even a subdiscipline.) The sociology of education tends to fit Kuhn's understanding of normal science (1996): there are a small number of problems, at which a group of scientists tinker together, moving slowly forward in their understanding. There is something deeply attractive about this institutional setting, but it is also intellectually slow, at least in comparison to the continual calls for paradigm shifts in other sociological subdisciplines. More importantly, normal science rarely produces broad theories that are useful for other areas within sociology. For some time, American sociology of religion looked at churches, and even 10 years ago, important importations from neo-institutionalism (e.g., Becker 1999) and rational choice theory (e.g., Finke and Stark 2006) were still basically within that normal science model. Like criminology and the sociology of education, there are also large stakeholders (namely churches and church organizations) interested in funding and encouraging a narrow set of questions in which they are institutionally invested. In the past 10 years, however, the areas of interest with the sociology of religion have changed, with studies of secularism, lived religion, postcolonialism, and non-Western religion fracturing the subdiscipline's commitment to normal science even as it makes it at least potentially more useful for other fields.

The third hunch is that the sociology of religion itself is just not that interested in broad theory building about social life. With important exceptions, sociologists of religion have tended to have a very high import/export ratio of theory, bringing in the latest fashionable trends (rational choice theory and neo-institutionalism some time ago, and lately field theory and boundaries) without producing much on their own. Those theorists who are exceptions—people like Courtney Bender (2003), Philip Gorski (2000), and Paul Lictherman (2012), Iddo Tavory (2009)—are often understood more as sociologists of culture, comparative-historical sociologists, or ethnographers rather than as sociologists of religion.

But this third hunch seems itself to deserve an explanation. While a full answer would require a large empirical project, I suspect has something to do with the often-religious roots of the sociology of religion subdiscipline, and for many of its practitioners. While the major sociology of religion conferences (ASR and SSSR) are now fairly secular, they have clear religious roots, and there remains some tension about the degree to which methodological atheism must be sociologists' standard operating procedure. This tension is obviously much more marked in religious studies, but it happens for us as well. If the purpose of the sociology of religion is to understand *religion*, or, even more baldly, if it is to understand *God and God's actions in the world*, then it makes sense that sociologists interested in social life but not religion per se would have nothing to gain from our subdiscipline. To the extent that we are studying religion as an example of broader processes of social life, then our work is exportable. To the extent we really believe we are studying a sui generis thing called religion, then it is not.

To preview the rest of my argument, I find religion generally to be a category that causes more trouble than it is worth besides as a pragmatic place filler. It is simply too easy for the category to skew our understanding of what we are seeing, forcing what is inevitably inchoate data into a form that almost inevitably reflects our political biases. More importantly, insisting on this category obscures the generalizability of our findings and the relevance of what happens in *religious sites* as processes that can be found in all of social life. ("Site" does not necessarily mean a physical location, such as a church or school, but any social configuration in which religious life happens and which is accessible via any sociological method, such as ethnography, interviews, or surveys).

Now that might sound more dismissive than I intend. I recognize that any argument or statement reflects a speaker's politics. So the burden of proof is on me to prove how *not* using the term religion is somehow (1) less politically problematic and (2) more empirically tenable than using the term, both of which I intend to show. It is the second of these two points on which I want to focus, because I am most bothered by the lack of analytic precision in the category of religion, and the often implicit assumptions about what religion entails that go into it. Various scholars have attempted to change how we understand religion (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2012; McCutcheon 2001), providing an important critique of how Western scholars often bring a Protestant bias toward beliefs over practices. Yet simply changing the definition seems to miss the point. Chasing after a thing called religion is not really that useful unless we are actually motivated by a desire to understand a thing called *religion* instead of social life. It is not at all clear that there is anything uniquely *religious* in what we call religions, nor that anything we describe in religious life cannot be found outside of it. Particularly, for a secular social science concerned about social life writ large, the study of the category of religion might not be the best use of our time.

However, there is a clear difference between religion as a category and religion as a site: the study of self-professed religious groups, or even groups that we have decided have religious traits, has provided some of early sociology's most meaningful theoretical concepts (e.g., value spheres, charismatic authority, ritual, collective effervescence, taboo). To the extent we want our discipline to export and not simply import theory, we need to stop thinking of religion as a category and start thinking of it as a site through which to propose and test theories of social life.

## WWFD: WHAT WOULD THE FOUNDERS DO?

While there is regular debate (O'Toole 2001) about the continued relevance of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, it is sometimes helpful to examine the founders' writings less to carry forward their legacy than to determine how successful arguments work and how similar argument could be made. And it seems a fair criticism to say the founders *did* care about religion an analytic category and not

simply as a site. After all, Durkheim's definition of religion is one of the most famous in the social scientific study of religion, and both Marx and Weber had no problem describing a thing in the world called religion, analyzing how it works and what it does in the world.

Yet a more careful reading of these three authors shows that they were less interested in understanding the nature of religion than they were in understanding how human life works, with religious experience one of its most meaningful and important components. It is for this reason that Weber insists "the essence of religion is not even our concern" (1991:1). Weber is hedging his bets for a few reasons. He is aware that "the external courses of religious behavior are . . . diverse" (1991:1) and that any outright generalization would prove difficult. Yet this cannot be the entire answer, as he goes on to make such generalizations on the very same page. Instead, it seems as though Weber is simply refusing a substantial definition of religion, emphasizing what religions does—its "conditions and effects" rather than its "essence." He is nowhere more famous for this than in his *Protestant Ethic* (1930), in which Calvinist theology matters, though only as ideas that have led to certain actions and material realities rather than others.

Weber goes the other direction as well, describing not only how religions affect the world but also how the world affects religions. He seeks an explanation for the "practical impulses for actions which are founded in the psychological and pragmatic contexts of religions" (1946:267). These "ethics" can be traced to specific social conditions, as can the more specific content of religion: "gods and demons, like vocabularies of language, have been directly influenced primarily by the economic situations and the historic destinies of certain peoples" (1991:13). It comes as no surprise why Weber refuses to give a definition of religion, as the idea of religion seems so entirely contingent on social situations and the relatively arbitrary economic and political nature of that religion's founding (1991: 131–32).

Similarly, for Marx, religion is less interesting as a thing in itself than as a means of understanding human development, and he uses the word interchangeably with herd or tribal consciousness, which only comes to change via the division of labor (1978c:158–59). Yet humans ought to act spontaneously as humans, as selves and as elements of nature—for "man is a part of nature" whose "physical and spiritual life is linked to nature" (1978b:75). This reference to a spiritual life hints at Marx's underlying concern less with religion than what religion can do, and the ultimately human capacities it can either repress or release. Under natural religion, humans are nothing but a herd; under modern capitalism, humans are nothing but animals (1978b:74). These are all empirically debatable points, and Marx's use of the term "natural religion" is susceptible to many of the critiques of the analytic category of religion I describe below. Yet what is most striking is the work the category of religion accomplishes for Marx: he is less interested in the nature of religion as a problem to solve and more interested in what religious actions and beliefs have contributed to human experience. Like Weber and Durkheim, religion is so many things to Marx that its definition

becomes less important than its function. In his words, “Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d’honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human being inasmuch as the *human being* possesses no true reality” (1978a:54–55). Religion is most interesting less for what it than for what it accomplishes.

Finally, even though Durkheim is by far the most explicit of these three in providing a straightforward definition of religion and setting out to determine what religion *actually* is, his eventual definition is so expansive that he has defined culture itself. For Durkheim, the social nature of religion forms both its function and its basis in reality: “the worshipper is not deluding himself when he believes in the existence of a higher moral power from which he derives his best self: that power exists, and it is society” (2001:170). Religion cannot be an individual experience (2001:320) and neither does it stem from some innate ability in all humans; religion arises, rather, from “the school of collective life that the individual has learned to idealize. . . . Society has constructed this new world by constructing itself, because it is society that this new world expresses” (2001:318). Contemporary society needs these religious rules—the need to coalesce in effervescence, to need to know the sacred and profane—just as much as any earlier tribe. Durkheim might have begun his project describing a church, but he ends it describing society. All three of these thinkers were less interested in what a careful study of religious life could teach about religion than what it could teach about social life.

## LEAVE THE WHITE WHALE ALONE

Like the founders, we should not ignore that many real people do care about and use the term religion, nor am I insisting that we should deny religion is an important and meaningful category in much of the world’s daily life. The key distinction is that this is a *native category*, which is incredibly useful, as opposed to an analytic category, which, as described above, is less useful. The problem is that these definitions often vary so widely—some demand a god, some do not, some insist on belief, others on practice—that trying to lump them all together seems an exercise in either vast dilution or inevitable exclusion. Of course, social scientists, like all humans, use categories, and these categories inevitably fail to account for the world’s vast heterogeneity. Yet the problem with the word religion is that it comes with a tremendous amount of state power and legitimating authority: for many people in the world, calling something a genuine religion is to markedly increase its status and the legal rights and abilities of its adherents (Povinelli 2006; Sullivan 2011). Just as importantly, various scholars have argued that the category of religion inevitably brings with it a sense of Protestant European superiority, often with ethnic overtones, rendering “natural” and *sui generis* something which is actually historically constituted (Nongbri 2013).

Responding to these critiques, recent efforts to categorize religion (Riesebrodt 2010; Vaquez 2010) have shown how religion can and should be understood much more as a series of practices rather than as commitments to certain beliefs. Each of these recent efforts has inevitable limitations: by the very nature of having precise definitions, they lose certain elements of what others might consider religious life. In fact, one could fairly criticize a recent effort to root religion in practices as moving the pendulum too far in the other direction, ignoring the importance of intellectual commitments and beliefs (March 2011). Yet what is useful about a definition too far to this or that extreme is that it provides some analytic precision as to what is being discussed. To respond that religion can be saved by bringing the pendulum back to the middle is also a losing argument, in that religion becomes simply the practices *and* beliefs *and* anything else done by people who are religious. Such expansiveness is fine in locally situated contexts, as there will inevitably be important distinctions separate religious groups make (e.g., we dress like X; we believe Y). Yet to say religion is as religion does is not much of an analytic category.

That is not to argue that these arguments are flawed or useless. I, for example, have been much enriched by the encouragement to study practices within religions. One of the things I've tried to do in my work on Evangelical Protestants (Guhin 2013) is to flip the typical script: while many scholars are accused of studying non-Protestants via the orthodox lens (focusing on beliefs over practices), I have studied Protestants via the orthoprax lens (focusing on practices over beliefs). Now, of course, practices and beliefs cannot be so easily separated: Muslims might be "orthoprax," but the first of their five pillars is a statement of belief, and Evangelicals might be "orthodox," but, as I and many others have shown, they are continually aware of the importance of "walking the walk" and not just "talking the talk" (e.g., Griffith 1997; Luhrmann 2013). More importantly, the two relate to each other: beliefs can motivate certain practices, just as the repeated enactment and importance of certain practices can make key beliefs seem more or less important. However, we do not need a thing called religion to make any of these arguments. Indeed, the "practice turn" has been a critically important part of recent sociology (Bourdieu 1990; Cetina et al. 2001). The centrality of practices and their complicated interactions with beliefs are certainly clear in the study of religions, but there is nothing essentially *religious* about these processes or their interactions.

Yet is not giving up on the category of religion going a bit too far? Yes, religion has a lot to share with culture, but, following Durkheim, is not religion the basis of culture? Do not sociologists still have a lot to learn from that thing called religion? Of course, I am being intentionally provocative to suggest that we should stop thinking about the *analytic category* of religion—the conversations might well still be useful. And I have never suggested we abandon the obviously important *native category*. Yet the problem with this Durkheimian understanding of religion is exactly what I began to describe earlier: if "religion" is the basis of culture, then religion is culture, as neo-Durkheimian sociologists like Jeffrey

Alexander and Philip Smith show. In their work (1993), all cultures have moments of collective effervescence, certain rituals, and the sacred and profane. If anything is religion, then religion is actually not that helpful of a term.

These debates obviously have a long history in the never-ending conversations about the substantial versus functional definitions of religion (e.g., [Dobbeaere and Lauwers 1973](#)). One of the most important contributions to this debate is the insistence that religion itself is a historically instantiated category, meaning that what the word *religion* signifies has come to mean very different things to different native communities not just across space but also across time ([Gorski 2000](#); [Nongbri 2013](#); [Smith 1998](#)). These differences then bleed into the way we as scholars (who are also part of native communities) look at and analyze religion. That is not to deny that we develop certain ad hoc definitions of religion as a means of comparing certain groups as I have in my own ethnographic comparison of Muslims and Evangelicals or as Riesebrodt has done in his magisterial comparison of religious groups around the world. While doing so helps us understand certain groups that we have, *by the nature of our definitions*, understood to be religious, it just as easily eliminate other groups that, *by the nature of equally valid definitions*, could also be religious. In Riesebrodt's definition, for example, he is not able to examine Marxists, members of Greenpeace, or agnostic Buddhists. Yet via Durkheim's definition, we could certainly analyze those groups. They have a sense of the sacred. They have certain orienting rituals and practices that bring about a sense of collective effervescence and an orientation toward what is most central in the world. Even beyond Durkheim, we could argue that they all have clear eschatologies, teleologies, soteriologies, and even ecclesiologies. There is quite a bit that is "religious" about these groups.

That is not necessarily a problem if we acknowledge that religion is a pragmatic definition that we can set up for this or that comparison in order to understand certain elements of how social life works. Yet if we want a *true* understanding of religion, then I am not sure we have it in Riesebrodt's work, or in anyone else's for that matter. Like debates over the definition of the word *culture* ([Hall et al. 2010](#)), which is also a messy combination of analytic and native categories, pragmatic definitions about the meaning of words provide a helpful starting point for certain comparisons but do not seem especially helpful as ends in themselves.

## SO WHAT GOOD IS RELIGION?

In what remains of this short reflection, I want to suggest a few ways that religious sites—as opposed to the category of religion—can be helpful. First, it is both politically and intellectually important for us to continue our research on religious communities, organizations, practices, beliefs, and individuals. Yet we ought to do so simply as *sociologists with a particular empirical focus*, in the same manner in which sociologists of art or sociologists of race distinguish themselves from other sociologists more by their content area than their theoretical



methods. By religion as a site, I mean that we ought to view religion as a location through which we can make important empirical and theoretical observations about social life, in the same that education or gender could be understood as locations through which to build broad social theory. By “location” here, I do not necessarily mean ethnographic field sites: these locations could just as easily be populations in which we could conduct interviews or surveys. Yet, particularly for survey research, one could argue that religion is necessarily a variable and therefore a category. It is a fair point, though much of the best survey research on religion does not use a category like religion anyways, precisely because it is far too analytically imprecise. It would instead ask *what* a person’s religion is, and even then, it would more likely ask about church attendance, performance of certain key practices, and agreement with particular beliefs. These questions about religion can obviously be biased toward a certain definition of religion as truly strong and authentic (one that is more orthodox or orthoprax, for example, or more or less evangelistic, exclusivist, or articulate). Yet this is only a problem if we insist on one coherent definition of religion. If we instead drop the category of religion and simply use these people as sites through which to determine empirical and theoretical questions, then we run into none of these problems. The correlation between church attendance and political activity is important both theoretically and empirically. Whether or not such regular attendance is *true* religion (as opposed to a lack of attendance) might be theologically relevant, but not sociologically.

A move away from religion as a category also has important political implications. To the extent that we are continually referring back to this or that theory of religion, we ignore Charles Taylor’s important reminder that all human beings have certain “social imaginaries” to help them make sense of the world (2007). These social imaginaries are things we take for granted as true—e.g., rape should not be a boon of war, children should not be killed for being weak—that are not self-evidently true in all of human history, and which only come to make “logical” sense given certain other first-order presuppositions. Taylor critiques the “subtraction stories” of post-Enlightenment scientism, showing how certain contemporary secularists are simply wrong to insist that we have found the really real moral fabric of the universe after “subtracting” religion away. In fact, as Taylor (and before him, Nietzsche) argues, none of the virtues we claim to care about is obviously true.

While I identify as a secular leftist, I am sympathetic to my (often conservative) respondents’ complaints that their claims are somehow illegitimate because they are based in religion as opposed to “culture.” Habermas has similarly acknowledged that religious believers should not be forced to find secular translations for their most deeply held commitments (2008:130). While I agree that religious individuals ought to be able to make their case in a public square without simply using an argument from scriptural or ministerial authority, it is worth remembering that secularists are not that far from arguments from authority themselves. While I completely and emphatically support gay marriage, it is because I take it on authority that individual autonomy is more important than

traditional conceptions of gender roles. I could go one level deeper and say that gay marriage will make more people lead “flourishing” lives than not allowing gay marriage, but even this statement assumes that people’s flourishing is the metric upon which we should judge our public decisions. Acknowledging religion as a *part* of culture rather than distinct from it will help us to better discuss heated cultural issues in a fair-minded and honest manner.

Besides the importance of de-exoticizing religion as a means of making our political discussions more honest, de-exoticizing also provides an important means of introducing analytical concepts. Just as Weber and Durkheim introduced terms like charismatic authority and collective effervescence that are used across the sociological spectrum, so could we contemporary sociologists of religion use our field sites as opportunities to develop concepts applicable to wide swathes of social life. I here suggest one such concept, *scripture*, in depth, and then nod at the possible use of the study of prayer as it relates to nonhuman interaction.

### **Scripture**

Instead of thinking of scripture as necessarily related to religion, we could also simply define it as “a written text that (1) codifies an overarching meaning system for an interpretive community (Fish 1980) and (2) establishes and mediates authority among its community of believers.” We could then draw on insights from the sociologies of culture, religion, literature, and knowledge to make all sorts of interesting comparisons, including the Bible, the Quran, the U.S. Constitution, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) within their respective interpretive communities. We could argue that scriptures (1) have authority via mechanisms similar to Bourdieu’s “symbolic power” (1991) and Austin’s speech act theory (1975) (2) are distinct from other texts because of their authoritative power, moral quality, and over-arching focus (3) are foci of fields of power driven by various ideological and material interests; and (4) can be distinguished from other scriptures through four types of gradation: open/closed, public/private, high expertise/low expertise, and law/narrative.

Religion is not at all necessary in this account. Instead, the most important feature of scripture would be its *authority* rather than its religious quality or even its common reference. When someone quotes a popular novel, what is signified is a common cultural referent with possible persuasive power; when someone quotes scripture, what is signified is a common cultural referent with coercive potential. As with Bourdieu’s symbolic power, what is important about the sign is the coercive apparatus beneath it and the processes through which such signs are developed and manipulated. Scripture contains power in both its descriptions of reality and its legal injunctions. The words of scripture are “performative” in Austin’s sense, in that what they proclaim to be true are necessarily true for the community of believers (e.g., schizophrenia is a disorder; Jesus is the son of God). Also, if it can be conclusively shown that a scripture explicitly commands something, then that command *must* be followed. When believers choose not to follow a command, they must justify this disagreement by providing a different

interpretation, a different means of interpretation, or an acknowledgment of partial separation from the discursive community. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1988) and Talal Asad (1993) argue, what is distinctive about a discursive community is not agreement but a common tradition of argumentation.

As with literature, scriptures lend themselves more easily to certain interpretations rather than others, though the meanings of scripture are ultimately historically contingent. Once established, these meanings prove difficult to change: this process is iterative, with the scripture forming commitments and those commitments retuning back to the scripture. In a process similar to Bourdieu's symbolic power, the methods of interpretation are related to material and ideological interests (e.g., the difference between feminist and patriarchal readings).

Certain scriptures are more capable of being changed than others. The Qur'an and the Bible are understood to be closed systems without the possibility of revision; meanwhile, the DSM and Constitution are understood to be relatively open. However, this distinction is less important than it might seem, as the Constitution and DSM are rarely described as open when being used and the Bible and Qur'an—like all scriptures—are subject to new interpretations that make them less closed than they might appear. Some scriptures also have more public authority in that their injunctions are translated into law, policy, or commonly accepted cultural traditions, while others are more privately relevant to specific moral communities. This is potentially the case for any scripture, as all four scriptures described here influences governments and culture. The closer a scripture's field is to the field of power (generally the state), the more its private coercive ability affects nonbelievers (the public). The more public a scripture is, the more invested nonadherents are in its interpretation, such as non-Muslims and non-Christians advocating certain readings of those religions' scriptures to effect changes in culture and government.

There is often debate within discursive communities about the degree to which scriptural interpretation requires high or low levels of expertise. These debates reflect contestations within an interpretive field, but they also demonstrate long-standing cultural hermeneutics, such as the difference between the Evangelical focus on the plain easy meaning of scripture and the Muslim respect for scholarship as a requisite for interpretive power. In certain cases, radically different styles of interpretation will make the same text into different forms of scripture for different groups of believers (such as differing Catholic and Evangelical views of the Bible).

The final gradation within scripture is between law and narrative. Certain scriptures are much more legal with a narrative implicit within them (the DSM and Constitution), while others are more narrative-focused with an implicit legalism through an injunction to imitate the narrative (the Bible and Quran). As with the other gradations, many combine both. Yet scripture is not only law and law is not necessarily scripture. Even if contracts can be as over-arching and as subject to debate as scriptures, they are generally established between discrete individuals rather than a community and they usually lack the moral stakes of scriptures. Similarly, law books have the authority of scripture in as much as their words

have coercive power: while civil legal codes are generally scriptures, the religious laws of Muslims, Catholics, and other traditions are almost always *secondary* to scriptures. Common law is so diffuse that it generally lacks the concentrated moral force and over-arching quality of scripture.

While the hermeneutic strand of modern social science originated in the study of scripture, it has focused on scripture's methods of interpretation rather than what it does and how it works. This argument shows how a sociological theory of scripture can demonstrate the moral and institutional stakes involved in the interpretations and application of certain texts, bringing a focus on texts to sociological descriptions of power and a focus on power to a sociological description of texts. While this work is certainly about religious groups and religious objects, it is not necessarily about *religion*.

This formal theory of scripture obviously requires significantly more development, and I include it not so much to provide a fully formed theory of how texts influence fields of power but to show how something seemingly indigenous to religion (scripture) can help us understand much broader cultural processes. At no point in my formal theory did I describe anything like "religion": instead what was most critical were interpretive communities that might or not be called religions but for which the term would be a native category unimportant to the analytic work at hand.

### ***Other Possible Applications***

There are probably dozens of great ideas contained in our work in religious communities, and all of these ideas have implications for much broader studies of social life, in the same way that concepts like taboo, ritual, and charismatic authority have originated in the study of religious groups and gone on to explain much of what happens in the world. There are of course many excellent examples of this in contemporary sociology of religion, particularly those who use religion as a site to work out insights from cultural sociology. For example, sociologists of religion have made promising innovations in the study of storytelling ([Braunstein 2012](#)), boundaries (e.g., [MacGregor 2008](#); [Moon 2012](#)), and social interaction ([Lichterman 2012](#)).

Yet these insights could just as easily be tested in other contexts, and while religious groups are certainly interesting and worthy of study in and of themselves, their real theoretical payoff is the degree to which practices or mechanisms happen at religious sites that provide greater analytic leverage on broader social processes (such as Durkheim's description of the sacred). For example, there has been a recent surge in the study of human interactions with nonhumans ([Cerulo 2009](#)), yet there has not been nearly enough work on how various forms of prayer reconcile with these theories. How is prayer—as it is understood both by religious practitioners and social scientists studying them—different from and similar to other human interaction with nonhumans? How is my talking to God different from or similar to talking to myself, or to my dog, or to my father after he has died? To what degree do my beliefs and practices of a certain religion or secular

commitment affect these interactions with nonhumans? A focus on religion as a category would stop at describing how prayer works, while a focus on religion as a site would provide insights into a particular process (interaction with nonhumans), describing how that process work in a specific site (religious communities or individuals) and how it might function similarly or differently in other sites.

## CONCLUSION

Religion is obviously important in the United States and, as a source of empirical questions, it is not going to go away any time soon. To the extent that we are more interested in solid empirical work on already self-identified religious communities, then very little of my suggestions here actually matter. We will go on looking at how marriage rates interact with denominational identity, or how racism correlates with church attendance. In these sorts of studies—which are the bulk of the “big three” sociology of religion journals (*Sociology of Religion*, *Review of Religious Research*, and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*)—the definition of religion is not really as important as the correlation between more specific variables within religion.

Yet for those projects with greater theoretical ambition, that want to develop a new concept, or to discover an as-yet uncovered mechanism, then the category of religion ultimately holds us back. To the extent that we are talking about a thing called religion, then our work is neither exportable nor relevant to the rest of sociology. More importantly, it makes what might be unique about religion uninteresting, and yet what Durkheim and Weber (among others realized) is that religious life can often provide ideal types of essentially human practices. I have identified two of these—scripture and prayer—and shown how both can be used to describe how texts relate to fields of power and how humans interact with nonhumans. There are certainly many more, and what is helpful about not being beholden to a definition of religion is that we can identify one—say the Buddhist or Hindu focus on meditation—and look for cognates without requiring that it be an essential component of a certain definition. To the extent that we are talking about social processes we found in religious sites, then our work will matter in the same what that Durkheim’s and Weber’s continues to matter. I therefore suggest we spend less time talking about what religion is and more time talking about what religious people do.

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