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Religion and the Social Sciences

Basic and Applied Research Perspectives

Edited by

Jeff Levin

TEMPLETON PRESS
For C. Eric Lincoln, my first academic mentor,  
who introduced me to  
the social scientific study of religion
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When I began graduate school, the social scientific study of religion barely existed, and nearly all of my professors and fellow students thought it was a dead-end because religion was sure to disappear within our lifetimes. On the other hand, it was widely agreed that the “founding fathers” of social science had paid considerable attention to religion. However, as I proceeded through a course on the history of social thought, taken during my first semester, I realized that claim about the “founders” was not so.

Durkheim, for example, did not even believe that religion was a phenomenon in itself, but only a mask for social integration, the object of all worship being nothing but society itself. Because he believed that religion was universal, and because he mistakenly believed that Buddhism was a “godless” religion, Durkheim incorrectly excluded belief in the gods from his definition of religion. Accordingly, his famous *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* has very little in it that is germane to the role of religion in the modern world, while leading anthropologists have claimed it bears little relationship to religion in “primitive” societies either. As for Marx, religion was but the enemy of human progress, a source of false consciousness, and certainly nothing anyone would care to study per se. Weber paid a bit more attention to religion, but, unlike my fellow students, I quickly recognized that his classic work on the Protestant ethic was silly because, as many historians had pointed out, fully developed capitalism existed many centuries before the Reformation.

So I concluded that religion had always been pretty much ignored in the social sciences, not that it mattered that much to me since it had not occurred to me to make religion one of my specialties. That I did was a happy accident.
Very few in my entering cohort at Berkeley had received financial support. During my first semester, I worked nights as a reporter for the *Oakland Tribune*. Then, when the first semester grading put me at the top of the class, I was offered a research assistantship at the newly formed Survey Research Center. There, I went to work for the center’s director, Charles Y. Glock, who was one of the very few sociologists of religion at that time. He assigned me to a newly funded, very large study of anti-Semitism, and soon I was in charge of designing both a regional and a national survey to explore the link between Christian beliefs and hatred of Jews. I recognized almost at once that, in addition to doing the primary study, this was a priceless opportunity to collect a huge trove of survey data on religiousness in its many aspects. And in pursuing this opportunity, I became a sociologist of religion—officially so when Glock and I published *Religion and Society in Tension* in 1965.

Now, fifty years and forty books later, I find Jeff Levin referring to me in his introduction to Part One of this volume as “a father of the social scientific of religion.” Whatever role I may have played, this well-written volume makes it clear that the social scientific study of religion is no longer a tiny collection of scholars at third-rate colleges and universities. Anyone who is serious about any of the social sciences must take religious effects into account. As will be revealed in the following chapters, religion has potent effects on crime; on mental and physical health; and on economics, politics, history, and family life. And very often these effects are not those assumed by secularists. For example, religious Americans have sex more often than do the irreligious and are more likely to attend concerts and plays. They also live longer, even when the effects of “clean living” are taken into account. I have had enormous fun pursuing all these matters. I also have the pleasure of knowing the distinguished authors of the chapters in this book.

Rodney Stark, PhD

*Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences*

*Baylor University*

*Waco, Texas*
At first glance, it may seem odd that a book providing state-of-the-field overviews of social science research on religion would be edited by an epidemiologist, of all things. Yet by training and throughout my academic career, I have functioned at the intersection of my discipline and the social sciences. While my graduate work was undertaken in schools of public health and biomedical sciences and while my first two academic appointments were in medical schools, it has been my good fortune to be mentored exclusively, at every stage, by sociologists: C. Eric Lincoln, Preston Schiller, Berton Kaplan, Kyriakos Markides, and Jersey Liang. And among my colleagues in the religion and health field over the past three decades have been a cadre of sociologists, including Christopher Ellison, Robert Taylor, Ellen Idler, David Williams, Linda George, Neal Krause, and Kenneth Ferraro. Finally, I am privileged to serve on the faculty at Baylor University, at a research institute founded and co-directed by sociologists Rodney Stark and Byron Johnson.

While I make no formal claim to be a social scientist (my lone credential being a second major in sociology completed as an undergraduate at Duke), I have been blessed with mentors and colleagues who have helped me to refine my sociological imagination and skill set. All epidemiologists have a secondary or cognate field, corresponding to their substantive or methodological expertise. This is typically microbiology or parasitology or a clinical medical specialty (e.g., cardiology, oncology, psychiatry), or perhaps a basic biomedical science discipline (e.g., biochemistry, genetics), or a newer interdisciplinary field (e.g., environmental science, neurotoxicology). For social epidemiologists, it may also be a social or behavioral science discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology, anthropology)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
or another public health field (e.g., health behavior). By dint of my hybrid background and interests, it is my distinction to be the only credentialed epidemiologist I have ever heard of who can truthfully say that his cognate field is the sociology of religion! I have never been quite certain if this is something to be proud of or amused by, but this I can say with certainty: Without great mentors and colleagues from whom I have learned to function as a social scientist, and who have shared my intellectual curiosity about religion and its impact on human well-being, I would probably be working in a lab somewhere or in a public health department or in the medical care field and would not have been privileged to devote my career as a biomedical scientist to something as mysterious and wonderful as the study of faith and spirituality.

There have been distinct challenges but also distinct rewards on this path. For one, I have gotten to know so many people in so many social science disciplines and fields who share my fascination with religion and who have sought to elevate the study of religion within their respective domains. I have learned that, just like me within epidemiology, there are folks laboring in so many unexpected places, each with their own story of overcoming perceptions of marginality and dealing with barriers, all because of an interest in religion. We share an appreciation for religion and a recognition of its salience as a driving force in the affairs of human beings, for better or worse, yet we recognize its continuing status as a taboo in our respective academic worlds. I often make light of my marginality as a religious scholar among epidemiologists, but is this really any more unlikely than those of my colleagues found in other strange places like political science, criminology, economics, or education? One thing that I learned early is that, to be successful at this kind of work, one must have thick skin and a healthy sense of stick-to-itiveness.

It is a privilege to be affiliated with the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, a research shop that serves as a very model of collaborative and interdisciplinary scholarship across social science disciplines and fields. We have among us distinguished faculty and affiliated scholars trained in most of the social sciences and beyond—even epidemiology—all of whom share a focus on research and scholarship on the broad topic of religion. These scholars include Rod and Byron, as well as Philip Jenkins, David Jeffrey, Gordon Melton, and Thomas Kidd. I learn something from these distinguished colleagues every day, and I am in awe of their
productivity and the depth of their learning beyond their home disciplines. This is the only place that I have ever worked where being a biomedical scientist who utilizes the methods of social science research to investigate subject matter most typically engaged within the humanities does not seem the least bit odd. For this I am continually thankful.

I am also grateful to our wonderful staff: Frances Malone, Leone Moore, and Meg Thompson; former staff member Cameron Andrews; and our work-study students. They have supported my efforts in more ways than I can enumerate here, and I would be unable to function without them. As with my previous two books for Templeton Press, I am especially thankful to Susan Arellano and her wonderful staff, who are all so professional, courteous, and patient. It is such a pleasure to work with such fine people.

Finally, thanks go out to my beloved wife, Lea, and to the Creator of the universe, who together are the source of all the good in my life, who inspire and sustain me, and who support me in completing the tasks that I have been assigned.
Religion and the Social Sciences
Introduction

Jeff Levin

In 2008, Templeton Press launched a book series on the theme of science and religion. This was a signal event for scholars whose research and writing falls at the intersection of these two great institutional domains. Religion and science evolved as a formal field of study many decades ago, and journals such as *Zygon* provide a scholarly home for the best work in this field, as do edited works such as *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science.* But the Templeton Religion and Science Series was instrumental in providing, for the first time, detailed state-of-the-science summaries for work on religion within numerous respective scientific disciplines and fields, including contributions from medicine, neuroscience, technology, cosmology, paleontology, mathematics, genetics, environmental science, and cognitive science. The book series is also notable for providing guidance for prospective investigators—both bibliographies of key works in each field as well as a blueprint for the future of scientific investigation on each respective subject.

As I began working my way through these fascinating monographs, it struck me that a project such as this might be usefully replicated for the social sciences. If not an entire series of books, then certainly a single volume covering the state of the science for many of the most prominent and promising social science disciplines and fields. The Templeton series made clear that there is lots of existing
religion, pastoring, and pastoral studies, church history, and so on. Scientists from across the intellectual spectrum have focused their research on religion and have contributed important works on the intersection of their particular domain of science with faith, spirituality, and religious experience. The same can be said for the social sciences.

RELIGION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Of all the social sciences, sociology has given the greatest attention, by far, to religious phenomena, including the impact of religion on human lives and social institutions, and the impact of human life and social institutions on religion. Each of the classical theorists whose work led to the evolution of the most significant grand-theoretical perspectives for sociology—Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber—wrote significant early-career works on religion, which continue to be read and to influence scholarship a century after their publication. These individuals, and specifically their prominent writing on religion, were influential in the development, respectively, of conflict structuralism, functionalism, and symbolic interactionism. More than any other profession of social scientists, whether from established disciplines or newer applied fields, sociologists have been attuned to researching, theorizing about, and commenting on the impact and salience of religion, for better or worse, on phenomena of interest.

Following the classical theorists, significant work on religion continued to appear in sociology throughout the subsequent decades. This includes important early to mid-century contributions by Ernst Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr, Joachim Wach, and Pitirim Sorokin. Troeltsch, a German theologian, posited his famous church-sect typology in The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, the grandfather of all subsequent such typologies and schemata by sociologists. Niebuhr, a Yale theological scholar, in his Social Sources of Denominationalism, offered a trenchant and extended commentary on the “ethical failure of the divided church” and on the thesis that the “history of schism has been a history of Christianity’s defeat,” a perspective that still resonates among many sociologists. In Sociology of Religion, Wach, a University of Chicago historian of religions,
defined the thematic foundations for much of what followed, including germinal discussions of the functions of religion, religion and natural groups, religion and social stratification, and types of religious authority.9 Sorokin, a Russian expatriate who founded Harvard’s Department of Social Relations, wrote in his later career a series of expansive works on the religious and spiritual roots and correlates of altruistic love,10 a subject experiencing a renaissance among contemporary researchers.11 Works such as these influenced the generation that followed, whose research on religion began to engage modern methodological innovations such as use of large-scale community or national probability-sample survey data, as well as to integrate theoretical and conceptual contributions from other disciplines, including psychology, economics, and political science.

In the 1950s and 1960s, a cohort of sociologists emerged who began the social construction of what today is recognizable as the sociology of religion, an established specialty within sociology. Pioneering works in this vein include Will Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew;12 J. Milton Yinger’s Religion, Society, and the Individual;13 Gerhard Lenski’s The Religious Factor;14 C. Eric Lincoln’s The Black Muslims in America;15 Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark’s Religion and Society in Tension;16 Peter Berger’s The Sacred Canopy;17 Bryan Wilson’s Religion in Secular Society;18 and important books and articles by Andrew M. Greeley, Robert Wuthnow, Robert N. Bellah, Jeffrey K. Hadden, Wade Clark Roof, Phillip E. Hammond, William Martin, William Sims Bainbridge, and others.19 Bellah’s essay, “Civil Religion in America,” was especially influential,20 and a good source of his collected writings is available.21 Also significant were the earliest efforts at multidimensional religious assessment, which evolved in equal parts from Glock’s five-dimensional model of religiosity22 and Stark’s taxonomy of religious commitment,23 and which represent ground zero for all subsequent social measurement of religion by sociologists.24 Greeley and his colleague, William C. McCready, also contributed by ensuring that religion was a major focus from the beginning of the annual General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.25

Today, the sociology of religion is a vibrant field of research comprising, in large part, sophisticated empirical research programs that use national and global population data. Multiple professional societies of long standing publish associated peer-reviewed journals,26
and important academic handbooks have been published for the field. Most large university departments of sociology have experts who conduct research on religion and teach undergraduate and/or graduate courses in the sociology of religion.

Significant figures in sociology continue to explore religion, whether as an “independent” or a “dependent” variable. That is, studies have examined religion as a meta-construct whose impact contributes to and shapes experiences and phenomena in numerous sectors of life, including politics; crime; family dynamics; fertility; sexuality; social stratification; occupational mobility; nationalism; mental health; and myriad other beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and statuses. Other studies have investigated dimensions of religiousness as constructs that are in turn shaped by these experiences and phenomena, and are conditioned in part by sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class.

Sociological research, from population-based survey investigations to the results of qualitative and social-historical studies, points to the ubiquity of religion’s influence on the lives of human beings, both individually and collectively. Sociologists continue, as well, to contribute insightful theoretical syntheses that seek to make sense of the how and why of religion’s place in society.

So, to summarize, within sociology the study of religion has long been an established and flourishing area of investigation. But this is less the case—or is not the case at all—in other social sciences. Either the history of scholarship does not go back as far, or contemporary efforts are less voluminous, less sophisticated, or of more recent vintage.

An exception is the psychology of religion. Notable work in this field goes back at least as far as William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* first published in 1902, and important research and writing have appeared in the century since that time. The field’s trajectory, however, has been somewhat of a broken line. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi has described the “rapid decline and final demise” of the psychology of religion as an academic field after about 1930. Only since Gordon W. Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice,* published in 1954, and the subsequent psychometric development of intrinsic/extrinsic (I/E) religiosity as an empirical construct, in the 1960s, has study of the psychology of religion begun to evolve into a large and influential area of empirical research. Within psychology today, as
within sociology, are multiple established peer-reviewed journals and major edited volumes focusing on religion, as well as, significantly, a formal division within the American Psychological Association with thousands of members. A very important milestone has been publication of the two-volume APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality, whose editor-in-chief, Kenneth I. Pargament, is lead author of the psychology of religion chapter in this book.

Aside from sociology and more recently psychology, religion has been much less a focus of scholarly work in the other basic social science disciplines and applied social research fields. Fortunately, this is beginning to change. Evidence suggests that, in some disciplines and fields, this evolution is happening quite rapidly. For example: specialists in religion have become the largest topical subgroup of the American Historical Association; the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture just sponsored its seventeenth annual conference; and the Religion, Spirituality, and Aging interest group is among the most flourishing specialty groups within the Gerontological Society of America.

All of these developments suggest that the time is right for this book. The intention in this volume has been to solicit state-of-the-science reviews from among the leading and most senior religious scholars within respective social science disciplines and fields. The sociology of religion has garnered the largest share of attention up to now, as noted, but in all of the other disciplines and fields covered in this book there is a story to tell about the emergence of programmatic religious research. There is a need for a single resource that focuses in depth on the subject of religion as investigated by social scientists whose work draws on theoretical, methodological, and professional traditions outside sociology. As noted, religion is becoming a mainstream and nearly ubiquitous topic of research within sociology, and one can find summaries of this work in many places. But the “story” of religion within other areas of social science is still about a collective work in progress.

For those who nonetheless would have wished to see this book include yet another field summary on sociological research on religion, two of the chapters in this book—on criminology and on aging—are authored by prominent sociologists. The author of the chapter on epidemiology (and the editor of this book) has a degree in sociology, and others among the chapter authors are regular collaborators with sociologists or publish in sociology journals. Finally, the author of
this book’s foreword, who has given this book his imprimatur, is the dean of all sociologists of religion. So sociology is well represented here, but, as just noted, there is an especially pressing need for a single book that brings together the best of what the other social sciences have to offer on the subject of religion. It is my hope that *Religion and the Social Sciences* will spark a renaissance of social science research on religion, especially from outside the province of academic sociology where it appears to be well established.

**RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

The Templeton Science and Religion Series provides “brief tours,” summary statements for general audiences interested in the relation between science and religion and theology. This book, by contrast, offers detailed and comprehensive statements on religion from the perspective of nine academic social science disciplines or fields. Each of the chapters is written in language that will be accessible to knowledgeable general audiences with interests in religion and in the social sciences, but the purpose is more explicitly to provide guidance for prospective academic investigators. Each chapter includes an overview and history of religion as investigated within a respective social science, a thorough summary of existing findings and theories, a roadmap for future research, and an annotated bibliography of seminal works. Each chapter is also thoroughly referenced. The authors were given a simple instruction: to write their “ultimate” statement on religion from within their respective social science, and they were given carte blanche to be as comprehensive, scholarly, and provocative as they wished. The end product, I hope, is a series of prolegomena and detailed field overviews for the social scientific study of religion that will serve to introduce this subject to both new and established investigators and to offer resources to jumpstart their own work on religion.

Each of the following four chapters in *Religion and the Social Sciences* provides a state-of-the-field summary overview of research and scholarship on religion for a respective basic social science discipline. These disciplines include psychology, political science, economics, and history. Each chapter author is widely recognized as a leading expert on the study of religion within his or her home discipline.

In their chapter on the *psychology of religion* (Chapter 2) Pargament and Exline outline the substantive contributions made by psychology
to our understanding of religion. These contributions include research and writing on religious motivations, on the mechanisms of religious development over the life span (including discovery, conservation, struggles, transformation), and on the different ways of being religious.

In his discussion of religion and political science (Chapter 3), Gill begins by providing a helpful conceptual roadmap for engaging the place of religion and the church in politics and the state. He then follows with a lucid theoretical discussion that goes into considerable depth on two schools of thought, which he terms the ideational and economic perspectives.

The chapter on the economics of religion (Chapter 4), by North, begins by proposing a model of individual religious choice, including the role of religious capital. Also included are a detailed summary of research on the behavior of religious organizations, a lucid discussion of religious markets and regulation, and an introduction to research on religion and economic growth.

In his sweeping summary of the historical study of religion (Chapter 5), Hankins traces the evolution of the field from the work of church historians to the emergence of the history of religion as an academic discipline. Focusing primarily on twentieth-century American religion, he offers a comprehensive summary of trends in contemporary scholarship, including the new social history, studies of evangelicalism and fundamentalism, mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic history, and the rise of global Christianity.

Throughout these four chapters, and within each of these disciplines, major points of narrative keep repeating.

First, until recently (and perhaps still), the study of religion has been taboo or at least marginalized. As a result, there has been a price to pay for a career focus on the impact of faith, spirituality, and religious beliefs and practices.

Second, despite this perceived status, scholarly writing on religious themes dates to the earliest days of the discipline as an organized intellectual endeavor. Writing on religious themes can be identified among the work of the discipline’s founding fathers.

Third, contrary to a general sense within the discipline that not much work on religion has been done or that existing work is inconclusive, large amounts of research and scholarship have been published. Further, where empirical studies are the norm, the weight
of evidence is statistically and substantively significant and is mostly positive (that is, religion on the whole is a force for good).

Fourth, there is much in the way of conceptual development and theory—however each discipline may choose to define theory. This has enabled sophisticated interpretation of historical and contemporary phenomena and, where pertinent, findings drawn from analyses of data.

Fifth, notwithstanding these observations, and until recently, the cohort of self-identified religious scholars within most of these disciplines has been a beleaguered lot. Thus, religious investigators often make common cause with scholars from other disciplines or fields who share an interest in religion.

This latter phenomenon can be observed, for example, within the emerging field of study that has grown up around investigation of religion’s impact on physical and mental health. The authors of this book’s chapters on psychology, gerontology, and epidemiology each have made major contributions to this area of research, including in collaboration with each other and with sociologists, and the authors of the criminology and family studies chapters have made significant contributions here as well. This observation, taken from one discrete area of research, underscores how often religious scholars, at least those who do empirical studies, tend to know one another and even work together across disciplines and fields. This lends an esprit de corps that takes the edge off the marginality that can surround identification as a religious scholar in one’s home discipline or field.

Each of the next five chapters in this book provides a state-of-the-field summary overview of research and scholarship on religion for each of five respective applied social research fields. These fields include family studies, criminology, gerontology, education, and epidemiology. Again, each chapter author is considered a leading expert on the study of religion within his or her field. Whereas the first group of chapters explores religion from the vantage point of major social science disciplines, this next group of chapters looks at religion from the perspective of applied fields of social research that are, by their nature, interdisciplinary. The authors of the chapters on criminology and gerontology are sociologists by training, but other types of social scientists have weighed in on religion within these fields. The author of the family studies chapter is a psychologist, but sociologists, especially, as well as social workers and others, have been prominent
within that field. For the education and epidemiology chapters, the respective authors are trained within education and epidemiology, but, as their chapters show, contributions to religious research in these fields have come from throughout the social sciences, both basic and applied.

In her chapter on religion and family studies (Chapter 6), Mahoney provides a comprehensive summary of a century of research on the intersections of faith and family life. She applies her Relational Spirituality Framework to describe how our relationships with God and our respective faith communities, as well as the spiritual values that exist within families, serve to structure, maintain, and transform family relationships.

In his chapter on religion and criminology (Chapter 7), Johnson summarizes evidence for religious commitment as a protective factor against delinquent behavior, among both youth and adults. Program evaluations and evaluative research demonstrate that exposure to faith-based prosocial behaviors and attitudes can reduce the risk of subsequent criminal activities.

In the chapter on religious gerontology (Chapter 8), George reviews over sixty years of empirical research on religion and aging, including studies of religion’s impact on categories of health outcomes (e.g., mental and physical health, cognitive functioning, disability, biomarkers, mortality) and on measures of subjective well-being. She also details results of aging, period, and cohort analyses of religious participation over the life course and identifies potential mediating factors that help to explain a salutary impact of religion.

The chapter on religion and education (Chapter 9), by Jeynes, narrates the history of faith-based schooling, emphasizing research on the effects of attendance on subsequent academic outcomes. He also surveys the evidence that religious commitment exhibits a positive impact more generally on educational experiences and offers explanations for these positive effects.

Finally, in his chapter on the epidemiology of religion (Chapter 10), Levin, the editor of this volume, outlines the century-plus history of population health research on religion. He then reviews study findings suggestive of a positive impact of religion on various outcomes (e.g., heart disease, hypertension, cancer, mortality, health status, psychiatric diagnoses), and discusses theoretical work that has proposed models and mechanisms of explanation for these results.