

Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion

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ABSTRACT *The social "scientific" study of religion originated in atheism and the basic theses pursued today, especially by psychologists and anthropologists, are little changed since they were first proposed by militant opponents of religion in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. In this essay I trace these links from major scholar to major scholar across the centuries. I then examine the remarkable irony that the recent emergence of a truly scientific approach to religion was accomplished mainly by an influx of "believers". I sketch why and how this happened before turning to an assessment of the persistence of atheistic biases. I conclude with suggestions about how a truly scientific study of religion can be pursued by both believers and unbelievers, if not by fanatics of either stripe.*

Introduction

Until quite recently, there was very little *science* in the social scientific study of religion. As a child of the Enlightenment, social science began with the conviction that not only was religion false, but that it was wicked and best gotten rid of as soon as possible. Of course, there was nothing new about atheism, many Greek philosophers rejected the gods, as did various schools of Indian and Chinese philosophy (Collins, 1968). Indeed, according to Clifford Geertz (1966), so do many members of preliterate and 'primitive' societies, making it likely that there were atheists even in Neanderthal times. However, what Thomas Hobbes and his friends began more than three centuries ago was something quite original. Not only were they the first to use the tools of a developing social science to attack religion, they tried to make a religion out of their science—an intellectual tradition reaching full flower more than three centuries later in Carl Sagan's recent popularizations wherein the 'Cosmos' is the proper object of awe and 'Nature' is always capitalized (Barbour, 1990; Ross, 1985).

In one paragraph of his enormously influential work *Leviathan*, written during the 1640s, Hobbes ([1651] 1956: I 98) dismissed all religion as "credulity", "ignorance", and "lies". On the next page he explained that the gods exist only in the minds of believers, being but "creatures of their own fancy" and hence humans "stand in awe of their own imaginations". Two centuries later, there had been a considerable evolution in academic jargon as demonstrated by Ludwig Feuerbach ([1841] 1957: 29–31) when he made the same claim:

Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject... God is the highest subjectivity of man abstracted from himself. (Feuerbach, [1841] 1957: 29–31)

Hence, Feuerbach concluded, religion is but the reflection of society which is why “the secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology” (Feuerbach, 1957: 207). Seventy years later, Émile Durkheim repeated (without attribution) Feuerbach’s major premise, asserting that “god ... can be nothing else than [society] itself, personified and represented to the imagination” (Durkheim, 1915: 206).

This is one of the two themes that have dominated social scientific theories of religion for more than three centuries: first, that the gods are illusions generated by *social* processes; second, that the gods are illusions generated by *psychological* processes. Only recently has the scientific standing of these claims been effectively challenged by social scientists.

In this essay I first attempt to summarize the intellectual history of the social scientific study of religion *as* atheism, tracing the links from major scholar to major scholar across the centuries. Then I examine the recent shift towards a more truly scientific approach, documenting that this transformation was mainly the result of the increased participation of ‘believers’. Finally, I note ‘survivals’ of the traditional atheistic biases, albeit in a somewhat muffled form and attempt to clarify that a *scientific* study of religion is entirely possible both for believers and unbelievers, if not for aggressive ideologues of either commitment.

When Atheism Went Public

At the start of the English Civil War, with *Leviathan* written, but not yet published, Hobbes fled London for Paris. This was the first of his several Parisian sojourns to evade punishment for his views—by Oliver Cromwell for his defense of monarchy and by the Royalists for his attacks on religion. However, Hobbes’ political difficulties ended in 1660 when the restoration placed Charles II on the English throne, for Hobbes had been his boyhood tutor and Charles was sympathetic to his views. Indeed, under Charles II an intellectual climate favorable to irreligion flourished in England, which has continued ever since, perhaps culminating in the recent spectacle of Anglican Bishops ridiculing belief in ‘the Old Man in the sky’ (cf. Robinson, 1963), while a Cambridge theologian (Cupitt, 1997) is praised in the *Times Literary Supplement* by another British theologian (Nineham, 1997) for dismissing ‘God’ as pure subjectivity. Thus, when Voltaire spent three years in England (1726–1728), he was startled by the open and widespread atheism, remarking that “In France I am looked upon as having too little religion; in England as having too much” (quoted in Durant & Durant, 1965: 116). Similarly, Montesquieu reported from England in 1731 that “There is no religion in England... if religion is spoken of everyone laughs” (ibid). This climate of opinion favored a new generation of militantly atheistic social thinkers, the most famous of them today being David Hume.

In his famous essay “Of Miracles”, Hume ([1748] 1962) wrote:

There is not to be found in all history any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicions of any design to deceive others... It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to

abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors... It is strange that such prodigious events never happen in our days. But it is nothing strange ... that men should lie in all ages. (Hume, 1962: 121–123)

Meanwhile, across the channel, the French *philosophes*, stimulated by the English example, were also devoting themselves to bringing about a world free of all illusion and superstition—a world beyond belief. Thus, Jean Meslier (circa 1733) charged:

All children are atheists—they have no idea of God... Men believe in God only upon the word of those who have no more idea of him than they themselves. Our nurses are our first theologians; they talk to children about God as they talk to them of werewolves... Very few people would have a god if care had not been taken to give them one. (quoted in Durant & Durant, 1965: 613–614)

For more than three centuries, social scientists not only tried to explain religion away, but to replace it. Voltaire wrote endlessly of the need to attack religion in preparation for the coming triumph of philosophy. Having become acquainted with Voltaire, Turgot, Condorcet, Diderot, and Rousseau, Horace Walpole (1765) wrote from France to a friend in England that the “*philosophes* are ... fanatic; they preach incessantly, and their avowed doctrine is atheism” (quoted in Durant & Durant, 1965: 781). And so it went. Early in the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte coined the word ‘sociology’ to identify a new social science that would replace religion as the basis for making moral judgments. In their turn, Marx and Engels hailed the coming victory of scientific atheism, just as Freud promised the triumph of psychotherapy over the neurotic illusions of religion. All of these attacks on religion were presented as ‘social science’, taking two primary forms: the *anthropological* (or comparative) and the *psychological*. This set a precedent that still lives—these two fields are today bastions of irreligion, more so than sociology or economics and *much* more so than the physical and natural sciences (Stark *et al.*, 1996; Stark *et al.*, in press). It is therefore appropriate to trace the role of atheism in the history of social science by giving primary attention to these two fields.

Atheism and the Origins of Anthropology

In any era when there is a substantial amount of travel, humans take interest in cultural variations, and when they do, religious comparisons always come to the fore. Thus, more than two millennia ago, the Greeks took particular interest in the similarities and differences that existed among religions in their part of the world. In his *History*, Herodotus (circa 450 BC) paid extensive attention to comparing gods and rituals and to tracing how they might have spread, based on his personal observations of about 50 different societies. For example:

I will never believe that the rites [of Dionysus] in Egypt and those in Greece can resemble each other by coincidence... The names of nearly all the gods came from Egypt to Greece ... but the making of the Hermes statues with the phallus erect, *that* they did not learn from the

Egyptians but from the Pelasgians, and it was the Athenians first of all the Greeks who took over this practice, and from the Athenians, all the rest. (Herodotus, 1987: 152–153)

The European ‘age of exploration’ produced a new era of traveller’s tales and once more prompted cultural comparisons. Thus, in 1593, Jean Bodin, a former Carmelite monk, wrote what many historians regard as the “first [serious] work of comparative religion” (Preus, 1987: 8)—it was written on behalf of atheism. In the *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, Bodin argued openly that by virtue of the competing claims to truth made by the clutter of faiths found around the world, “all are refuted by all”. Although Bodin did not dare publish, his manuscript was “circulated widely and became an underground classic widely read by seventeenth-century free-thinkers” (Preus, 1987: 9).¹

A century later, however, opponents of religion hit upon the device of disguising their intentions by writing books and pamphlets to discredit *pagan* religions, including not only Greco-Roman paganism, but all of the non-Christian faiths found in the New World, in Africa, and Asia. By appending perfunctory professions of Christian faith, they deflected accusations of heresy or atheism, knowing full well that their readers would recognize how these same critiques of paganism applied to Christianity. (Manuel, 1959) In 1697, Pierre Bayle published his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* in Rotterdam, in which he concentrated on the myriad sexual sins committed by the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, including incest, indiscriminate adultery, castration, homosexual and heterosexual rape, all “spelled out and discoursed upon with mock solemnity”, as Frank Manuel noted:

The more evidence Bayle could accumulate on the lusts of the gods and goddesses, the degrading acts to which they were impelled by their passions, the greater his delight... Bayle recreated a world of sex-mad divinities. (Manuel, 1959: 27)

Bayle’s emphasis on sexuality had been anticipated by Herodotus, who also seems to have missed no opportunity to report sexual aspects of religion, especially if they were bizarre. For example, in his discussion of the worship of Pan, who was portrayed as a goat both in Egypt and Greece, Herodotus acknowledged that no-one really believed that Pan was a goat, “nay, they think him like other gods; but why he is so depicted is not pleasant for me to say” (Herodotus, 1987: 151). He explained that this practice originated in Egypt among the Mendesians:

In this province, in my time, a monstrosity took place: a he-goat coupled with a woman, plain, for all to see. This was done in the nature of a public exhibition. (ibid)

Attacks on paganism also provided a safe device for revealing priests as impious, lecherous frauds and miracles as nothing but trickery or credulity. For example, in *Histoire des Oracles* (1686), a ‘best-seller’ of the time, Bernard Fontenelle feigned an air of piety as he ‘unmasked’ pagan ceremonies and especially the oracles at Delphi as carefully planned and staged fakery. Written in witty, readable prose (quite unlike the ponderous texts being written by the Dutch and German scholars of the time), Fontenelle regaled his readers with tales of priestly trickery and deceit, confident that his educated readers would

know that his real target was *all* religion, and particularly Christianity. Then, in his *The Origin of Myths* (1724), Fontenelle expanded his scope to include critical depictions of the religion of 'savages' and 'backward peoples' around the world. How are we to account for the astonishing myths that are accepted as factual among various human groups? "Men see marvels in proportion to their ignorance and lack of experience." The roots of religion are in "the unimaginable ignorance" of early mankind (quoted in Preus, 1987: 42).

By the time Fontenelle wrote, educated Europeans knew much about non-European faiths because by then, comparative religion had become a very active field of scholarship, drawing upon the flood of new accounts written by travellers, missionaries, and colonial administrators—in 1661 the Dutch scholar Godefridus Carolinus produced a 50-volume work on the many 'heathen' faiths! In addition to offering descriptive accounts of belief and practice, many of these were works of synthesis in which the emphasis was given to *similarities*, or what Fontenelle described as "an astonishing conformity" across cultures. For example, the universality of 'serpent cults' was detailed at length and, although unmentioned, the similarity to the account of 'The Fall' in *Genesis* would have been noticed by every reader. And most comparative religion scholars agreed with Fontenelle that these similarities arise, because they are "drawn from barbarism by the same means, and that the imaginations of ... distant people are in agreement" (quoted in Preus, 1987: 43).

Let me emphasize that few, if any, early writers of works on comparative religion were motivated primarily by scholarly concerns, being mainly engaged in demonstrating Bodin's principle that "all are refuted by all". As Manuel explained:

There was no innocence in Fontenelle's history of oracles; nothing which touched the origins, mechanics, ritual, and beliefs of any religion was treated without premeditation during this revolutionary period in the spiritual consciousness of Europe... Throughout the eighteenth century no discussion of pagan or exotic religion ever lost its heretical overtones, however fervid the philosophers' protests that they were only combatting the false gods... When the Holbachian atheists appeared in mid-century they found no difficulty in translating the[se] works ... into virulent anti-Christian tirades. (Manuel, 1959: 50)

The use of the comparative method to attack religion was not a short-lived activity utilized by skeptics in a more repressive time. The effort to expose the human origins of any particular religion by stressing its similarities to all religions has remained high on the agenda of anthropologists. Thomas Whittaker pointed out that part of the "critical attitude of the anthropologists" is to reveal that even "the most distinctive [Christian rituals] are transformations of worldwide savage or barbaric rites" (Whittaker, 1911: 3). Among the more frequently cited 'similarities' are those equating various forms of ritual cannibalism with the Christian practice of communion and those showing that the Christ story is but one of many in which a god impregnates a human female. This approach has been especially prominent in textbooks where one easily detects that the authors' intentions were not to convey that the religions of pre-literate societies are more sophisticated than we might suppose, but that Christianity is far less sophisticated than we might like to believe.

From the start, anthropologists attempted to further discredit religions by ratifying Fontenelle's assertion that their origins are to be found in the inadequacies of the 'primitive mind'. Thus, in 1704, La Créquinière depicted various rites and practices of mystics in India, Hebrew prophets, and Greco-Roman priests, and "what is perhaps most significant, compared them all to children... A psychology of infantile primitive mentality was already in the making" (quoted in Manuel, 1959: 18). That is, it was claimed that religion arose among credulous and not very bright 'savages' and continues in 'civilized' societies because of its appeal to the 'lower orders' whose mental development remains at the primitive level. As already noted, this view was fully developed by Fontenelle in his book on the origins of myths. Indeed, Durkheim's famous contemporary, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, praised Fontenelle's work as "wonderfully correct" for being the first to propose an evolutionary theory of religion, tracing it from its brutish origins to modern times (Lévy-Bruhl, 1899: 135–138). In fact, Comte's evolutionary stages of religious development were explicitly built upon Fontenelle's beginnings. (Preus, 1987) Comte claimed that the most primitive stage of such evolution is the 'theological' or religious stage. During this stage, human culture is held in thrall by "the hallucinations produced by an intellectual activity so at the mercy of the passions" (Comte, 1896 II: 554).

But, if Comte attributed religious ideas to hallucinations rooted in the passions, at least he did not propose that the primitive mind reflected inferior biology as Charles Darwin did. In what should have become an infamous section in *The Voyage of the Beagle, 1831–36*, Darwin described the people of Tierra del Fuego as subhuman beasts, no more capable of enjoying life than "the lower animals" (Darwin, [1839] 1906: 228–231). Similarly, Darwin's cousin Francis Galton claimed that his dog had more intelligence than did the natives in South Africa. (Galton, 1890: 82) Galton's friend Herbert Spencer agreed that the "primitive mind" lacks "the idea of causation" and is without "curiosity" (Spencer, 1896 I: 87–88). These views were virtually universal throughout the 19th century and, in slightly more moderate form, persisted well into the 20th century—as late as the 1920s, Durkheim's prominent colleague, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, wrote several entire books (Lévy-Bruhl, 1923; Lévy-Bruhl, [1926] 1979) to illustrate that the mind of primitive peoples is "pre-logical"—a view Durkheim (1913) emphatically endorsed.

Indeed, Durkheim based his famous theory of religion on (quite inaccurate) ethnographic accounts of Australian tribes precisely because he believed them to be the most primitive humans yet living and that they would thus exhibit the "most primitive and simple form" of all religion (Durkheim, 1915: 3). He admitted that some religions "call into play higher mental functions ... are richer in ideas and sentiments ... [and contain] more concepts". But, he argued, these variations are not sufficient to preclude application of lessons learned from the study of the most primitive faiths to the most complex. Thus, for primitive and modern believers alike, Durkheim traced their religion to the collective representation of society: "his reality, which mythologies have represented under many different forms, but which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations *sui generis* out of which religious experience is made, is society." (Durkheim, 1915: 418) That is, religion consists of members of a society, in effect, worshipping their reflection—a secret which only scientists, but not believers, can penetrate. Indeed, Durkheim disdained "theorists who have undertaken to

explain religion in rational terms” for regarding religion as “a system of ideas” when in fact it consists in its most elementary form as rite (Durkheim, 1915: 416).

A careful reading of Durkheim suggests that he was not nearly so concerned to show that the religious rituals of primitives, such as Australian aborigines, were as sophisticated as those of Christians, as he was to show that the rituals practised in Christianity were not much more sophisticated than those of ‘savages’. For the truth is that Durkheim and the other early social scientists mentioned thus far weren’t really all that interested in primitive religion. Their real agenda was to link all religion to primitive irrationality and thus to bring contemporary religion into intellectual disrepute. No-one has put this better than E. E. Evans-Pritchard:

... the persons whose writing have been most influential [on the subject of the primitive mind] have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists... They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way... Religious belief was to these anthropologists absurd... (Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 15)

Nevertheless, the primitive mind was a doomed concept in anthropology, once scholars actually began to do fieldwork. For the fact is that none of the prominent social scientific proponents of the primitive mind thesis had ever met a member of a primitive culture. *All* of their information came from the library, from written reports by various travellers. It has subsequently been shown that the source material used by the pioneers in the social scientific study of religion, from Comte and Spencer to Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim (Freud was mostly content to intuit his material) was incorrect, extremely misleading, and often simply fabricated. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965: 6) Once trained anthropologists came face-to-face with the objects of their study, the primitive mind notion collapsed under irresistible contrary evidence. The fatal blow was delivered by Bronislaw Malinowski, who carefully demonstrated the ability of the Trobriand Islanders to think rationally and to fully comprehend cause-and-effect. In a famous passage he explained that these ‘primitives’ resorted to supernatural means *only* as a *last* resort. They did not employ supernatural means in an effort to rid their gardens of weeds or to repair fences. They did turn to the supernatural to try to influence the weather. (Malinowski, [1925] 1992: 28–29) Malinowski’s views soon were embraced by all of the leading anthropologists of the time, at the end of his life even Lévy-Bruhl recanted. (Evans-Pritchard, 1981: 120)

Unfortunately, the collapse of the primitive mind thesis did not also result in the collapse of the notion that religion was, at its basis, essentially irrational—indeed, Malinowski was content to argue only that it was not irrational for primitive believers to believe, given the state of knowledge available to them. But he was not willing to grant equal rationality to civilized believers, for they should know better—Malinowski was as opposed to religion as any of his peers or predecessors. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965) This double standard has continued to dominate anthropological analyses of religion. In an essay in which he con-

demns the practice of dismissing religious beliefs as irrational merely because science 'knows' them not to be true, the distinguished Melford E. Spiro noted:

Implicit in my argument that the rationality of belief, regardless of its truth, must be assessed relative to the scientific development of the society in which it is found, is the thesis that irrationality is peculiarly characteristic of Western religious belief. It is in Western culture that the findings and the world-view of science are salient; it is in Western culture, therefore, that religious beliefs are often antithetical to scientific beliefs... (Spiro, 1964: 109)

Thus has anthropology converged with psychology in attributing religiousness to mental incapacities. And in proportion to their retreat from tracing religion to deficiencies of the primitive mind, anthropologists have been busy imputing it to ignorance and to psychological abnormalities. Thus, the famous anthropologist Weston LaBarre traced all religion to psycho-sexual problems, claiming that "A god is only a shaman's dream about his father" (LaBarre, 1972: 19). Let us, therefore, shift our attention to the other primary social scientific manifestation of atheism.

Atheism and Psychology

In his famous *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume proposed that "the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences" (Hume, [1739–1740] 1969: 42–43). Moreover, he claimed that only through the study of human nature can we adequately comprehend religion, for only as we are "thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, [can we] explain the nature of the ideas we employ". Hume's belief that psychology was the science to which religion must succumb was widely shared. As Peter Gay put it:

Not content with making psychology into a science, the Enlightenment made it ... into the strategic science. It was strategic in offering good, "scientific" grounds for the philosophes' attack on religion... (Gay, 1969: 167)

This line of attack did not start with Hume. Rather, by the late 1600s the 'psychology of religion' had already begun to develop in England, encouraged by the climate of opinion favorable to religious skepticism mentioned earlier. Of course, even during the reign of Charles II, one needed to at least pretend to accept the existence of God, however distant and inactive one's conception of divinity. Within this limit, pretty much anything went—anything not very pious that is, since devout Puritans and Catholics were regarded as enemies of the crown. Thus, "Englishmen did not need to expose the impostures of pagan oracles ... when their real target was ritualistic Judaism and Christianity" (Manuel, 1959: 58). In any event, it was the Earl of Shaftesbury who seems to have originated the psychology of religion (or, more accurately, the *abnormal* psychology of religion) in his immensely influential, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Shaftesbury, [1711] 1978). Of course, he did not use the term psychology—it was another century before it came into use. Instead, Shaftesbury referred to a new science concerned with "the Study of *Minds*" (ibid, Vol. 1: 290) and its aim "Comprehension of ourselves" (ibid: 285–286, his italics throughout). This new science "has Pre-eminence above all other

Science ... teaching the Measure of each and assigning the just Value of every thing in Life" and "By this Science *Religion* itself is judged" (ibid: 297). By application of this "superior science", Shaftesbury reduced religion to fear, anxiety and illusion. Thus, "there are certain humours in mankind which of necessity must have vent. The human mind and body are both of them naturally subject to commotions" (ibid: 14) and religious enthusiasm occurs "when we are full of Disturbances and Fears *within*, and have, by Sufferance and Anxiety, lost so much of the natural Calm and Easiness of our Temper" (ibid: 33). Furthermore, religious revivals and belief in miracles are rooted in mass delusions—a sort of pious contagion:

And in this state their very Looks are infectious. The Fury flies from Face to Face: and the Disease is no sooner seen than caught... And thus is Religion also Pannick; when Enthusiasm of any kind gets up; as oft on melancholy occasions, it will do. For Vapors naturally rise; and in bad times especially, when the Spirits of Men are low, as either in publick Calamitys, or during the Unwholesomeness of Air or Diet, or when Convulsions happen in Nature, Storms, Earthquakes, or other Amazing Prodigys. (ibid: 15–16)

Another Englishman, John Trenchard, was a co-founder of the abnormal psychology of religion. A friend of Shaftesbury's, Trenchard's *Natural History of Superstition* appeared in 1709 which also blamed religious zeal on an unbalanced mind. This 50-page pamphlet caused a considerable stir and was translated into French, becoming a favorite of continental atheists. As Manual noted, *Natural History of Superstition* undoubtedly influenced Hume's attacks on religion and was denounced by the Bishop of Mann as a "most pestilent book" (Manual, 1959: 72). However, Trenchard gained much greater prominence and influence when, in collaboration with Thomas Gordon, he began to publish a weekly newspaper in London in 1719 called the *Independent Whig*. Here, for several years, Trenchard continued his denunciations of all but the most tepid, 'rationalistic' Deism. However, Trenchard's lasting fame came when, in 1720, the *London Journal* began to run a weekly column by him and Gordon under the pseudonym "Cato". Thus, Trenchard gained access to a large, national audience—the *Journal* being England's most influential paper at that time. In all, 138 of *Cato's Letters* appeared, most of them on issues of political philosophy and good governance, but some continued Trenchard's efforts to reveal the psychological inadequacies of religious believers. In his essay of April 6, 1723, Trenchard characterized the "holy enthusiast" as a "mischievous madman" and such piety as "doubtless a fever in the head, and, like other fevers, is spreading and infectious". Moreover, "The enthusiast heats his own head by extravagant imaginations, then makes the all-wise spirit of God to be the author of his hot head ... because he takes his own frenzy for inspiration." (Trenchard, [1720–1724] 1995: 849–855) At this point in the essay Trenchard digressed to explain the rise of Islam:

... a barbarous, poor, and desert nation, half-naked, without arts, unskilled in war, and but half-armed, animated by a mad prophet, and a new religion, which made them all mad... It is amazing how much they suffered, and what great things they did, without any capacity for doing them, but a religion which was strong in proportion as it wanted charity, probability, and common sense. (ibid)

He concluded with a plea that the truth of any religion must be found through reason, not revelation. The next week came more of the same in an attack on claims by a prominent Quaker that faith can be discovered from within, through meditation and reflection, for "Jesus Christ is operating within us" (Trenchard, 1995: 855–864). Trenchard would have none of this. He claimed to know that

... there are many thousands ... who have actually tried all experiments of watching, internal prayer, outward and inward resignation, separation from worldly thoughts and actions, acquiescence of mind, and submission to the operations of the deity, yet have found themselves, after all, just where they set out ... and therefore, until I can feel something in my self, or discover some traces in others, *which I cannot account for from lower motives*, I shall take the liberty to call the pretenders to it, enthusiasts. (ibid, italics added)

Trenchard then rehashed all of his claims about religion as madness. *Cato's Letters* were a huge success and were subsequently re-issued in what eventually added up to eight volumes, all of which have since been reprinted many times. Indeed, the complete set of *Cato's Letters* was re-issued in two quality paperbacks in 1995.

John Toland was another English pioneer in the psychology of religion, whose work *Pantheisticon* (1720) added a new element by distinguishing between the religion of the masses and the religion of the enlightened *élite*. He wrote a religious service to be conducted only behind closed doors, *Praise to the All*, and included hymns to free inquiry, to truth, and to knowledge, none of these to be sung until the servants had withdrawn from the banquet room. "We shall be in Safety", he wrote,

if we separate ourselves from the multitude; for the multitude is Proof of what is worst... Persons of the strictest Moderation, behave Towards frantic, foolish, and stubborn Men, as fond Nurses do towards their babbling Minions... Those who flatter not Infants in these Trifles are odious and disagreeable to them. (quoted in Manuel, 1959: 67)

As Manuel explained, according to Toland, in agreement with Shaftesbury and Bayle, there were

two religions in every society, one for men of reason and one for fanatics, one for those who comprehended the marvelous order of the world and one for ... ignorant men full of terrors which they allayed with ludicrous rituals. (Manuel, 1959: 66)

Recognize that these are not 'antiquated' views. Whether religion is attributed to outright psycho-pathology, to groundless fears, or merely to faulty reasoning and misperceptions, the claim that religion is irrational still dominates the psychology of religion. Until recently, the notion that normal, sophisticated people could be religious has been limited to a few social scientists willing to allow their own brand of very mild, 'intrinsic' religiousness to pass the test of rationality.² Thus, Gordon W. Allport, who coined the term 'intrinsic' religion, suggested that mature adults could have faith, so long as it was subject to continuing and constructive doubts, but dismissed stronger affirmations of faith as "primitive credulity," and as "childish, authoritarian, and irrational" (Allport, 1960: 122). Indeed, Allport's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religion

precisely parallels the distinction between the religion of reasonable people and fanatics, proclaimed by Shaftesbury, Trenchard, and Toland three centuries ago.

The irrationalist premise persists in many forms. The most influential of these equates religion with psycho-pathology and is notable for the open contempt and antagonism expressed towards its subject. Thus, Sigmund Freud explained on *one* page of his famous psycho-analytic exposé of faith—*The Future of an Illusion*—that religion is an “illusion”, a “sweet—or bittersweet—poison”, a “neurosis”, an “intoxicant”, and “childishness to be overcome” (Freud, 1927: 88). As to the causes of this dreadful illusion, Freud offered a story about how in primitive times a dominant father hoarded all of the females. To gain sexual access to females, the sons rebelled and killed and ate their father in a cannibalistic orgy. From their subsequent guilt and their concern to prevent re-enactments of this occurrence, the sons established religious taboos against incest and cannibalism and began to worship their martyred father as God—thus did religion come into the world. This ‘explanation’, which surely is as crude and implausible as *any* myths of even the most ‘primitive’ people, is respectfully summarized at great length in many textbooks—Daniel L. Pals’s highly-praised and widely-used *Seven Theories of Religion* (Pals, 1996) gives it a lengthy chapter, as does J. Samuel Preus in his well-known *Explaining Religion* (Preus, 1987). Given that Freud’s theory of personality has been widely discredited and rejected in psychology, one must wonder why his work on religion lives on. C. Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis suggest an answer:

... even a cursory look at this literature underscores the fact that one can pursue a psychological study of religion for motives other than an honest attempt to understand the nature and consequences of religion. To be blunt, some psychologists have tried to conduct smear campaigns against religion in the guise of science... (Bateson *et al.*, 1993: 15)

Among them is Michael P. Carroll, who recently filled many pages in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* with claims that praying the Rosary is “a disguised gratification of repressed anal-erotic desires”—a substitute for playing “with one’s feces” (Carroll, 1987: 491). In similar fashion, Mortimer Ostow asserts that Evangelical Protestantism is merely regression “to the state of mind of the child who resists differentiation from its mother. The messiah and the group itself represent the returning mother.” (Ostow, 1990: 113)

Contemporary non-Freudian psychologists also have been prolific in diagnosing the ‘religious mentality’. At first glance, their views seem more credible since they do not claim that religious people are mentally ill *per se*. Instead, they are content to claim that sincerely religious people just do not think very well, having very rigid intellectual processes—that faith reflects ‘authoritarianism’. The invocation of authoritarianism to explain ‘fundamentalism’ has been common since World War II. It began when T. W. Adorno and his colleagues (1950) wrote about an “Authoritarian Personality” for whom religious belief relieves pressures stemming from the inability to tolerate any intellectual contradictions or ambiguities. Indeed, it was claimed that authoritarianism not only made people religious, but that the two factors combined to make them bigots as well—all this despite the fact that no competent study ever has demonstrated any correlation between authoritarianism and religiousness. (Stark, 1971b;

Bergin, 1983) Gordon W. Allport (1963) made similar claims about what he called 'extrinsic' religion. As should be clear from the earlier quotation from his work, Allport's motives were polemical, not scientific, and his writing on the subject amounts to little more than claims that his own brand of liberal social values, slightly tinged with vague notions of the sacred is *good* religion, while anything involving serious belief in the supernatural is *bad* religion. Slowly, psychologists have begun to acknowledge the fundamental biases in Allport's work, especially James Dittes (1971) and most recently Kirkpatrick and Hood (1990).

Atheism and Liberty

As is clear in many of my recent publications (Stark *et al.*, 1996; Stark *et al.*, in press; Stark, 1998), I do not think that an 'outbreak' of irreligion began in the 17th century because religion was losing its credibility in an age of science. For one thing, this was hardly the birth of atheism, which probably is as old as religion. As mentioned, irreligiousness is ubiquitous—common in 'primitive' societies as well as in the most modern. Indeed, the Bible takes note of atheists in Old Testament times (cf. *Psalm XIV*) and the non-canonical *Wisdom of Solomon* deals with them at length. Late in the 12th century, the prior of Holy Trinity in London wrote that "There are many who believe neither in good or evil angels, nor in life after death, nor in any other spiritual and invisible thing" (Coulton, 1930 III: 7). Max Gauna acknowledged that non-believers were "a fairly frequent phenomenon in the Middle Ages" (Gauna, 1992: 34) and François Berriot (1984) has provided an extensive portrait of what Gauna has characterized as "the hidden current of the Renaissance [which was] 'atheism' itself" (Gauna, 1992: 18). In 1542, Antoine Fumée wrote in answer to John Calvin's request for information about atheists in Paris that "unbelievers were numerous" (quoted in Gauna, 1992: 74). Calvin's letter of inquiry was prompted by his conflicts with powerful atheists in Geneva. (Collins, 1968)

What was unusual during the 'Enlightenment' was the extensive public expression of atheism—that it was possible to form and sustain an anti-religious social movement. Thus, in 1672, Sir Charles Wolseley wrote that "irreligion in its practice hath been the companion of every age, but its open and public defense seems to be peculiar to this." (quoted in Durant & Durant, 1963: 567) Even this was not a first. More than 1,000 years earlier, the Greek philosophical school known as the Epicurians denied the existence of any gods—arguing that even if supernatural creatures do exist, they are irrelevant, for they do not know humans exist and take no interest in the material world. (Gaskin, 1989; Whittaker, 1911) What was unusual about this period in Greco-Roman history was also what was unusual about the era of the 'Enlightenment', not the existence of irreligiousness, but the *freedom* to express it in public. Interestingly enough, Shaftesbury was fully aware of this parallel in noting that

Not only the Visionaries and [religious] Enthusiasts of all kinds were tolerated, your Lordship knows, by the Ancients: but on the other side, Philosophy had as free a course, and was permitted as a Ballance against Superstition. And whilst some Sects, such as the *Pythagorean* and latter *Platonick*, join'd in with the Superstition and Enthusiasm of

the Times; the *Epicurean*, the *Academick*, and others, were allowed to use all the Force of Wit and Raillery against it. (Shaftesbury, 1978, Vol. 1: 18)

The prominence of 'village atheism' in 19th-century America had the same basis. And, as is demonstrated by the fate of the village atheist, atheistic expression soon loses its shock value and then its audience. Believers learn to ignore it and unbelievers are not interested—which is why organized atheism has become so anemic. Indeed, as will be seen, that is why these days, the professional atheist can only find academic employment in 'religious' disciplines, such as religious studies, religion, or theology faculties. (Allen, 1996)

Faith and a *Scientific* Approach to Religion

Now, more than three centuries later, any of these early social scientists, "granted a ... glimpse of the intellectual future" would be amazed "by the spectacle of numerous scholars of our own day expending their energies in the study of religion" (O'Toole, 1984: 1). What early social scientists would find particularly upsetting is that there is no lack of things to study—that religion not only has failed to disappear, but is, in many ways, stronger than ever. And what the pioneers might find even more offensive is that the field no longer consists primarily of militant irreligion. Granted that even today, most social scientists continue to display a substantial bias against those who take their religion very seriously ('fundamentalist' being a deadly epithet), but unabashed village atheism no longer passes for scholarship. These days one must discuss causes of the decline in Catholic religious vocations, for example, in appropriately sober tones, not merely herald it as proof that people are becoming immune to 'papist foolishness'. This is not to deny that a substantial proportion of modern social scientists are atheists. But, the unintended consequences of this atheism has been to assume that religion is a rapidly dying institution and not worth studying. Consequently, scholars interested in the social scientific study of religion were driven to construct their own special institutional *niche* wherein greater respect for the subject matter has been combined with greater respect for the canons of science. It is worthwhile briefly to recount these developments.

The militant atheism of the early social scientists was motivated partly by politics. As Jeffrey Hadden reminded us, the social sciences emerged as part of a new political "order that was at war with the old order" (Hadden, 1987: 590). This new order aimed to overthrow the traditional European ruling *élites* and repressive political and economic structures, a battle in which the churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, often gave vigorous support to the old order. In response, social scientists declared against religion as well as state. And, although most were probably not prepared to follow Denis Diderot's proposal—"Let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest", most found the pairing apt and the end result desirable.

However, in the early part of the 20th century, as the center of gravity of the social sciences shifted from Europe to America, the image of religion as a political enemy waned and anti-religious antagonisms were muted. Lacking a compelling motive to attack religion, but also tending to be personally irreligious (Leuba, [1916] 1921), American social scientists mostly ignored religion

altogether (Swatos, 1989).³ Like insects embedded in amber, the views of the founders were dutifully displayed to generations of students, but the social scientific study of religion was far more of a museum than an area of research—"It was as if the founders had said it all" (Hammond, 1985: 2).

Following World War II, a rapidly increasing number of American social scientists began to do research on religious phenomena. Their interest was stimulated by the vigor of American religion, which not only refused to wither away, but seemed to grow in popularity. Indeed, during the 1940s and the 1950s, a substantial religious revival appeared to be taking place in the United States. This was probably primarily a media event sustained by the proliferation of church construction projects which were necessitated by the rapid growth of new suburbs. Nonetheless, it stimulated a great deal of research and legitimated support for such research by major granting agencies. Research on religion was also stimulated at this time by the repeated encounter with stubborn religious 'effects' by those working in other areas—for example, religion has a substantial independent impact on marriage, divorce, fertility, educational attainment, infidelity, crime, drug and alcohol consumption, to name but a few. (Wuthnow, 1979; Stark & Bainbridge, 1997; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997)

But, perhaps ironically, the most important factor in creating a truly scientific study of religion was the growing participation of persons of faith. This was initially stimulated by the growth of social science in church-affiliated colleges and universities and the creation of denominational research departments. This soon led to the formation of new organizations to sustain 'religious' sociologists from the militant disdain and discrimination they encountered in secular social science circles. Thus, the American Catholic Sociological Society (ACSS) was organized in 1938 by 220 American Catholic sociologists seeking shelter against the withering atheistic (and often Marxist) abuse they suffered within the American Sociological Society.⁴ Many of these members specialized in 'church sociology', in that they used social science methods to conduct evaluation studies of various Catholic programs and institutions. In 1940, the American Catholic Sociological Society began to publish its own journal, *The American Catholic Sociological Review*. Then, as the ecumenical spirit grew in post-war America, the Catholics were prompted to rename their journal *Sociological Analysis*. By then many members of ACSS held appointments in secular schools and the work of non-Catholics soon began to appear in *SA*. With the change in name there also came a change in editorial policy: forthwith the journal was devoted entirely to social scientific research and theorizing on religion. By 1970, leaders of the ACSS found the designation as a Catholic organization had become unrealistic and so the name was changed to the Association for the Sociology of Religion. Then, to be consistent, in 1993, *SA* was renamed *Sociology of Religion*. Thus ended the era of American Catholic sociology. However, while it lasted, it sustained some very gifted scholars who made major contributions to the scientific study of religion, including Joseph Fichter, Thomas F. O'Dea, and Andrew Greeley, each of whom achieved an international reputation far transcending 'Catholic' sociology.

The Religious Research Association (RRA) was the Protestant counterpart of ACSS, its initial members being staff of the research divisions of various denominations. This group originated as an informal 'committee' which began to meet in 1944. (Hadden, 1974) These meetings were formalized in 1951. In 1959 the RRA began to publish the *Review of Religious Research*.

The first stirrings of concern for a scientific approach to religion among Americans in secular academic circles took the form of a regular faculty seminar which began at Harvard during the 1940s, involving scholars having at least mild personal religious commitments, including Walter Huston Clark, Gordon Allport, Horace Kallen, James Luther Adams, Paul Tillich, Pitirim Sorokin, Talcott Parsons and J. Paul Williams. (Newman, 1974; Glock, 1998) In 1949, this seminar led directly to the organization of the Committee for the Scientific Study of Religion, which in 1956 was renamed the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). In 1961, the SSSR first published the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. In response to the journal, membership in SSSR leaped from around 200 in 1960 to more than 800 by 1962. (Newman, 1974)

Meanwhile, stimulated in part by these American developments, the social scientific study of religion was resumed in Europe with the formation of small organizations in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, each of them consisting of Catholic scholars. In 1948, the International Conference for the Sociology of Religion was organized by 16 Catholic social scientists from France, Belgium and the Netherlands. (Dobbelaere, 1989) Like their American counterpart, these European groups have ceased to be Catholic and now even accept members from the New World. However, they have remained quite small and, consequently, several European journals devoted to the social scientific study of religion proved to be very short-lived. (Beckford, 1990) Nevertheless, two of these efforts succeeded: *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* and *Social Compass*, both founded in the 1950s, the former in France and the latter in the Netherlands. In 1985, a British social scientist founded *Religion Today*, which was subsequently renamed the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.

These journals were founded to provide an outlet for articles reporting social scientific research on religion, which the existing journals too often rejected on the assumption that the subject was *passé*—that these were merely studies of a dying and objectionable phenomenon. (Beckford, 1985; Thompson, 1990) The existence of these new journals stimulated a considerable increase in the number of social scientists working in the area. By 1973, the SSSR had become an international organization with 1,468 members.

It is important to recognize that while many of the founders of these groups and journals were men and women of deep religious commitment, they had also been well-trained in research methods; most had attended the leading graduate schools⁵ and all were extremely concerned to obtain unbiased results. Indeed, because sociologists of faith were so accustomed to being dismissed as incapable of objectivity, they virtually sanctified the canons of scientific research. To read their work is to encounter constant reminders of the obligation to fulfill textbook methodological standards and for objectivity—a concern far greater than was expressed in the secular journals of the time.

During the 1960s, these new journals and their respectable contents helped to attract a new generation of talented social scientists from leading secular universities to the field. Some of these scholars were personally religious, many of them were not, but all were genuinely interested in religious phenomena and unwilling to prejudge research results. And they had something else in common: most of them belonged to or were closely identified with the 'Berkeley Circle' made up of Charles Y. Glock and the faculty and students whom he recruited,

encouraged, and funded at the University of California, Berkeley, during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Charles Glock left Columbia University for Berkeley in 1958 where he founded the Survey Research Center. An active Lutheran and trustee of several seminaries, Glock was always on the lookout for funds and opportunities to do research on religion. Before the 1960s ended, he had helped to add Robert N. Bellah and Guy Swanson to the list of Berkeley professors. But even more important was the extraordinary collection of Berkeley graduate students (and visitors) who became involved in the social scientific study of religion. It was they who recreated the field, and here too, most of the credit goes to Glock. More than 40 persons who have published work in the sociology of religion were *students* at Berkeley during the 1960s.⁶ Had they studied elsewhere, most of them would not have done work on religion. But, as a critical mass of unusually talented young students gathered around Glock (in part simply because he had research assistantships to offer), others were influenced by their example and soon, by their sheer numbers, they made religion a 'hot' topic. Many other prominent scholars (including Raymond Currie, Leo Driedger, Jeffrey K. Hadden, Phillip Hammond, Barbara Hargrove, Hans Mol, W. G. Runcimen, Ruth Underhill, and Bryan Wilson) became associated with the Berkeley Circle by frequent visits or by spending a year or two in residence. In the ensuing decades, members of the Circle have trained scores of graduate students, many of whom have gone on to train others. Thus, an extraordinary number of sociologists of religion in the world today can trace their intellectual 'family tree' directly back to the Circle. Consider that when a Section on Religion was established within the American Sociological Association in 1994, three of the first four chairs of this section had been student members of the Berkeley Circle—Robert Wuthnow, Rodney Stark, and Ruth Wallace.

As a result of all this activity, a body of new, competent studies (by now numbering in the thousands) soon began to pile up—"a vast, rapidly growing literature", as Warner put it (Warner, 1993: 1044). Moreover, this was not primarily a literature of polemics or of speculation. Rather, as Bryan Wilson remarked, "sociological interest in religion has found increasingly empirical expression" (Wilson, 1982: 11). That is, the new literature deals primarily in *fact* (cf. Argyle, 1959; Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997). Consequently, once religion became the object of real research, it began to appear in a rather more favorable light, as researchers tried to determine *if*, as noted above, authoritarianism was related to religiousness, rather than to simply assert this as self-evident—as the original authors had done (Adorno *et al.*, 1950). Thus, studies reporting that the *higher* their incomes, the *more frequently* people in North America and Great Britain attend church had to be taken seriously, because they were based on valid samples, the data were properly analyzed, and the findings were consistent in study after study. (Demerath, 1965; Stark, 1964; Stark, 1971a) Similarly, an immense pile of studies explored the link between religiousness and psycho-pathology, and the consistent finding was that religious people enjoy better mental (and physical) health. (Stark & Bainbridge, 1997; Ellison, 1993; Ellison, 1991)

As these findings make clear, the 'facts' are often entirely at odds with nearly three centuries of 'theorizing'. As a result, it is now impossible to do credible work in the social scientific study of religion based on the assumption that

religiousness is a sign of stupidity, neurosis, poverty, ignorance, false consciousness, or that it represents a flight from modernity. Unfortunately, social scientists not involved in the study of religion have been very slow to get the word and most still accept the old impieties. Although that often results in arrogantly incorrect reviews of papers on religion, when they are submitted to general social science journals, it has no great impact on the field itself. What does have impact, however, are the residual biases that remain within the subgroup itself. That is, many of the traditional attacks on religion live on in modified forms that distort the field. In the remainder of this essay I shall discuss the more important of these.

Prevailing Biases

The first major bias concerns the *emphasis on weird and obscure groups*. That is, the space a religious group receives in journals is almost directly inverse to its size and conventionality. A coven of nine witches in Lund, Sweden is far more apt to be the object of a case study than is, say, the Episcopal Church with more than two million American members. Some of this merely reflects the fact that it is rather easier to get one's work published, if the details are sufficiently lurid or if the group is previously undocumented. A recitation of Episcopalian theology and excerpts from the *Book of Common Prayer* will not arouse nearly the interest (prurient or otherwise) that can be generated by tales of blondes upon the altar and sexual contacts with animals. However, some of this preference for religious exotica also reflects the tradition going all the way back to Jean Bodin, to serve as proof that religion is rooted in fraud, foolishness, fakery, and perversion—much of it sexually motivated if the truth be known. Thus it is that even when selecting from among groups well outside of the mainstream, there is a very strong preference for the trivial and strange. For example, over the past 35 years the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* has published three articles each on Rajneesh and ISKCON, but none on Jehovah's Witnesses. Similarly, since 1970 *Sociological Analysis* has published five articles on the Unification Church (the Moonies), but only one on the Seventh-Day Adventists.

Obviously, I am not suggesting that we should not study new or obscure religious movements. Of course they *ought* to be studied, if for no other reason than they are our equivalent of the fruit fly, as William Sims Bainbridge (cf. 1985) loves to put it. What I am saying is that we ought to give at least as much attention to large, socially significant, religious groups and movements—even if their behavior is respectable. For the past decade, millions of American men have been filling sports stadia as part of the Promise Keepers movement. Where are the studies? Late in October 1997, Norwegian voters installed a new government in which more than half the ministers, including Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, are 'born-again Christians'. I do not know of a single article in any of the journals mentioned in this essay suggesting that there *is* any significant born-again movement in Norway.

The second primary bias is greater *antagonism* towards groups to the extent that their *members are highly committed* and the more vivid are the images they project of the supernatural. It is almost as if groups are 'better', the closer they come to disbelief. Indeed, the effort by activists in the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NASSR) to omit all supernatural elements from

the definition of religion is intended to justify aggressive atheism as *the* rationale of religious studies. (Allen, 1996) If religion can be redefined as recognizing the 'sacred' in human relationships or in the majesty of nature, then those obsessed with ridding students of belief in the supernatural can claim to be religious scholars and hence to have the right to enlighten students that most of the Bible is false, that Jesus said few of the things attributed to him and died a failed revolutionary (or that Jesus was a Zen master, or magician, or a marginal Jew, or did not exist) and that the history of Christianity is but an unending 'history of atrocities'. (cf. Mack, 1996; Borg, 1995; Crossan, 1991) Such an eventuality was anticipated by Ernst Troeltsch nearly a century ago, when he opposed the creation of "a Department of Religious Studies" on grounds that it either would be "staffed by dilettantes without specialization, and committed to religious research without religious commitment, which would bring joy to no one, least of all itself; or [it would] be the object of quarrels between believers and unbelievers ..." (Troeltsch, [1906] 1991: 113).

Clearly, today the personal religious beliefs of students are treated with far more respect in social science courses than is often the case in religion or theology departments, some of which have become the last academic outposts for the professional atheist. (Allen, 1996)⁷ But, even authentic social scientists of religion freely express hostility towards any group showing the slightest sign of 'fundamentalism'. Consequently, there are hundreds of articles to warn against the Christian Right and to explore the social psychology of its adherents (it is still all right to equate fundamentalism and psycho-pathology), but not one *exposé* of the Christian Left. No doubt, many readers wonder what *could* be said against the Christian Left. Let me give a simple and revealing example.

Several years ago, Stephen Johnson and Joseph Tamney discovered that some Americans oppose abortion when there is no concern for the mother's health or for severe birth defects, but support capital punishment under some circumstances. This struck them as so illogical that they devoted an entire paper to trying to reveal the twisted thinking behind it, settling for the conclusion that such people "tend to be authoritarians and dogmatic authoritarians tend to ignore or compartmentalize inconsistent beliefs" (Johnson & Tamney, 1988: 44). It is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of Americans hold this 'illogical' position. Moreover, it seems never to have occurred to Johnson or Tamney (who have done many excellent studies), or to any journal reviewers or to the editor, to wonder about the other 'illogical' combination of these beliefs. No explanation was deemed necessary for supporting abortion in all instances and opposing capital punishment in all cases. The latter is, of course, the prevailing view on the Christian Left.

Finally, even among many of the most objective practitioners, the notion persists that the social scientific study of religion *per se necessarily is corrosive* of faith. The basis of this fallacy is the notion that to be true, religions must be immune to social scientific analysis, being inexplicable enigmas. For example, it is assumed that if believers, and especially leaders or founders, can be shown to behave in predictable ways, subject to normal human desires and motivations, then their religion must be a wholly naturalistic phenomenon, having no supernatural aspects. From this view, the fact that people mainly convert to a new religion because their relatives and friends already had done so, rather than being attracted by the new doctrines, is seen as discreditable proof that religion

is no more than a human invention. Why else, skeptics ask, would converts require social support rather than be moved by spiritual guidance? Why would movements spread through networks on the basis of interpersonal relations rather than on the basis of scriptural merit?

This typical form of attack on the credibility of religion ignores what all believers readily acknowledge, that there is always a human side to religious phenomena. For example, adherents to many religions, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews, believe that the divine *could* convert the whole world in an instant, that the option to sin *could* be removed, and that other such miracles easily *could* be accomplished. Followers of these faiths also assume that this is not the divine intention. Rather, they believe that the divine acts through history, employing imperfect human agents and, indeed, many faiths depict the *humanity* even of their founders. Thus, for example, there is nothing inherently discreditable in discovering that following his first revelation, Muhammad feared that he was losing his sanity, that Jesus agonized in Gethsemane ("My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" *Matthew 26: 39*), or, at a more mundane level, that those who train and supervise missionaries are concerned with developing effective tactics, with sustaining morale, and with all the other common issues arising from organized human action. Consequently, from the point of view of believers, there is nothing blasphemous about examining the *human side* of religious phenomena in *human terms*. The social *scientific* study of religion does nothing more.

In the end, what distinguishes the scientific from the old atheistic approach to religion is fundamentally a matter of motives. As social scientists, our purpose should neither be to discredit religion nor to advance the religion of science. Rather, our fundamental quest is to apply social scientific tools to the relationship between human beings and what they experience as divine. Science may examine any aspect of that relationship except its authenticity.

Conclusion

At a recent annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion a prominent psychologist of religion asked to be introduced to me. Having exchanged pleasantries, he came to the point: "You are a Mormon, aren't you?" When I told him I wasn't and never had been, he said he found that hard to believe because of the tone of my various articles about them. Within the hour a very angry feminist historian accused me of being a 'crypto Christian'. I am proud of these misperceptions because I take them as proof that I have so fully outgrown my days as a village atheist that no one now can tell where I stand.

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NOTES

1. It was finally published in 1857.
2. In keeping with this psychological tradition, the US Census of 1860 classified inmates of mental

- hospitals according to the *cause* of their psycho-pathology, finding that one of the most common was "religious excitement" (Stark & Bainbridge, 1997).
3. William Swatos carefully refutes the 'received wisdom' that the American Sociological Association was founded by pious Protestants whose religiousness governed the early agenda of the field. (Swatos, 1989)
 4. Note the appropriate acronym.
 5. "In 1934, the General of the Society of Jesus, Vladimir Ledechowski, S.J., sent a letter to the American Jesuit Provincials, insisting that they send large numbers of their men to get their doctorates in the most prestigious universities of the United States and abroad. It was important, he said, that we prepare Jesuits to maintain the prestige and competence of Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. As a result, many of us, such as myself and Father Joseph Fichter, S.J., found ourselves at Harvard University and elsewhere; and large numbers returned to our Jesuit colleges and universities with a high level of training in a wide variety of disciplines in secular universities." (Fitzpatrick, 1989: 391)
 6. Graduate students at Berkeley during the 1960s, who have published at least one significant article or book within the social scientific study of religion, include: Robert Alford, Randall H. Alfred, Earl R. Babbie, Laile E. Bartlett, H. Taylor Buckner, Fred Byrd, Randall Collins, Ian Currie, N. J. Demerath, III, Henry C. Finney, Bruce D. Foster, Toyomasa Fuse, Stephen Hart, Donald Heinz, Max Heirich, Travis Hirschi, Barclay Johnson, Jonathan Kelley, Arthur Leibman, John Lofland, Gary T. Marx, Armand L. Mauss, Jean Messer, Donald Metz, Michael Otten, Thomas Piazza, Melvin Pollner, Whitney Pope, Linda Pritchard, Harold E. Quinley, Philip Roos, Guenther Roth, Metta Spencer, Rodney Stark, Donald Stone, Stephen Steinberg, Ann Swidler, Alan Toby, Jean-Guy Vaillancourt, Ruth Wallace, R. Stephen Warner, Robert Wuthnow.
 7. I find this perverse despite the fact that these same people cite my work as representative of what this new religious studies curriculum would stress.

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