

Review

Religion and Everyday Life

by Stephen Hunt

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Religion and Everyday Life by Stephen Hunt is an exciting, up-to-date introduction to the latest theories in the sociology of religion. The present work encompasses the theoretical and empirical current work in this field which is regaining the interest of professional sociologists after a period of decline dominated by the paradigm of "hard", ineluctable secularization.

This volume is structured into nine chapters, with a preface and an introduction. The preface states the focal point of the general synthesis which is this work: "its task is to explore how and why religion continues to impact in meaningful ways but at the point where religion really matters, in the everyday life of individuals" (p.XI). Although the motivation for this over-all review of the most important advances in the sociology of religion is constituted by the perceived increase of the religious life in our time, the book argues that the claim to a resurgence of religiosity is unsubstantiated.

The first chapter (*Contemporary religion: changing definitions*) presents three main sociological approaches to religion. First, the substantive approach, can be traced back to Edward Tylor and focuses on the belief in the supernatural, considered the common ground for all religions. The main weakness here is pointed out by historians of religion and anthropologists: the division of reality between a natural order and a supernatural one is a peculiarly modern conception, which can be

misleading if we are to understand pre-modern cultures. On the other hand, secularization theories contend that this ontological dichotomy is fading, the sacred having less and less importance in our societies at large. The functionalist approach is summed up in the seminal Durkheimian definition of religion, according to which religion works in a positive and "functional" way for the well-being, stability and integration of society. Another wide interpretation of religion is constituted by the phenomenological viewpoint, for which religion is "an integral part of the construction of reality, making the social world, knowable and accountable to human beings" (p.19).

Post-modernist perspectives: the yet but not yet presents different sociological inquiries into the development of religion in advanced societies influenced by the post-modernist loss of mega-narratives. Quite diverse in themselves, all these theories have one point in common: they jettison the mega-narrative theory of "hard" secularization, favoring a more complex, nuanced view of religious life having both areas of resurgence and decline.

Essentially an American contribution, *rational choice theory*, the subject of the third chapter, applies the rational choice paradigm (built upon the assumption that human beings have always acted out of enlightened self-interest and are motivated by achieving "rewards" and avoiding "cost") to our field of interest, introducing concepts like: *religious marketplace*, *supply-side religion*, *religious consumer*. Although this theory has proved seminal for researches regarding the American society, where there have been historical conditions for pluralistic, market-like religious life, the theory has proved inappropriate when it came to considering the Western Europe, characterized by the conditions of a quasi-monopoly.

The context of everyday religion, the fourth chapter, presents the social shifts into religious forms of socialization, both throughout generations and via spatial structures of spatiality. In this chapter, the manifest thesis of the book, namely that religion is decaying in spite of some disparate, though powerful, signs of resurgence. The author invokes statistics showing the decrease in attendance of religious forms of socialization as Sunday School, the powerful effects upon religious congregation brought upon by change and mobility characteristic of modern life, and the blurring of the traditional rites of passage. All these transformations have an irreversible impact upon the transmission of religion and the consecration of a person in a given religious community, which jettisons the concept of a life-cycle, namely, each human life is considered as a repetitive, socially pre-established development, marked by the traditional rites of birth, wedding and death and introduces the

concept of a life course, according to which each person has an individual, unique, unmarked (or arbitrarily marked) life.

The fifth chapter, *Demographic variables – continuity and change* discusses earlier religious divisions, when a certain church corresponded to some social status. An ever increasingly fragmented culture, dominant in Western, developed countries, renders the social class as a useless category and previous denominational cleavages are no longer relevant in a society with so vast array of lifestyles of personal choice. So, the long relationship between demographics and adherence needs to be reconsidered according to the pluralistic influences of modern life: higher education, mass-media, ethnic and religious pluralism.

From Church to Choice – Transformation in contemporary Christianity (chapter six) presents the market-like attraction of Christian denominations, especially on the American continent. Elements like dressing, music, exquisite buildings, mega-churches, different degrees and aspects of commercialization transform churches into a kind of religious enterprises which can be called "designer churches" (Harvey Cox), which are judged by the speed they attract newcomers, funds or other hallmarks of success. These churches are trying to accommodate to the world, using marketing techniques in order to attract and retain believers.

Opposite to the glitz and glamor of these "marketed" churches there are the fundamentalist and ethnic religions. *Faiths of Certainty – Fundamentalism and the Religions of Ethnic Minorities* discusses the apparent growth of this type of religions in the "religious marketplace". All these faiths provide an alternative to the lifestyles common in a given society, nevertheless the secularization is a process which affects them as well as society at large. More than that, their human part, namely being socialized in a certain culture, is more important than the pure spiritual seekership.

The New Age, Self-Spiritualities and Quasi-Religions, the final chapter, presents the phenomena on the borders of religion, which the author calls "part-time religions". Beyond these movements, there lies a main teaching, "to unlock spiritual powers dormant in the individual which can be used for his or her potential by way of personal growth and healing" (p.165), which can be understood as a fulfillment of the Durkheimian prophecy of the "cult of man", namely of rendering the human being aware of her own possibilities of self-development.

As a *Conclusion*, Hunt presents the possible conceptions of religion as presented by N.J. Demerath based on the concept of "sacred" in contrast to the former misleading concept of religion. According to Demerath, defining religion "substantively" and

the sacred "functionally" helps to resolve a long-standing tension in the field by broadening the conceptions of the sacred and of "sacralization" (p. 168).

The sociological studies in the book are the most relevant and up-to-date. The author does not take sides, presenting the main points in a critical manner, attention being given both to the correct interpretation of sociological data and to the theoretical concepts.

The volume, *Religion and Everyday Life*, provides an interesting and well-documented introduction to the sociology of religion, being of interest for any scholar related to the fields of religion and sociology.

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