Author’s Introduction

This is my account of how sociology of religion developed in America. It is a history, but a history the way a sociologist would tell it. So it is not about a few great individuals who made unique contributions against all odds. There were in fact cases that approximated that story line, but that is not the focus here. It is not an intellectual history in the sense of some ideas and theories that evolved over time. There were cases of that too, but again that is not the focus here. Sociologists look at social processes, more or less coordinated actions in which many people participate. They look at social movements, organizations, groups working in concert and, often enough, groups working at cross purposes. That kind of phenomenon is what characteristically turns up in my account. Sociologists often use tables of statistics to reveal patterns in collectivities of people. I will be using a number of tables in two of the chapters, but the reader will not need a background in quantitative analysis to understand what the tables show. The mathematical presentations will not go beyond frequency counts and percentages.

A friend of mine who heads a law firm and teaches accounting law has introduced me to others on occasion as someone who works in something called, as he strains his voice, sociology of religion. The emphasis in his voice would convey a mixture of disbelief and discovery, as if I were engaging in something implausible and exotic. A sociologist—isn’t that something the village atheist grows up to be? Can the typical sociologist be objective about matters supernatural? Can anyone interested in religion be objective about anything? I do not mind the attention and consequently feel no compulsion to defend my professional pursuit. But the suspicious regard is widespread and lay beneath much that happened in the history of American sociology of religion. So we need to contemplate what sociology is, what religion is, and what the sociology of religion would be.

Sociologists want to understand what is going on in the world around them. Normally, something is always going on, and if nothing seems to be happening the appearance of such a vacuum needs to be explained. Who has a stake in nothing seeming to happen? What intentions set in motion both what happens and efforts to hide what happens? This is normal human curiosity, and in a sense every wide-awake person is a sociologist. Pursuing a curiosity about the human environment in a serious way is sociology. Note that it is a curiosity about that which is human. Consequently, a sociology of religion is about the religiousness of humans, not the divine nature of suprahuman beings. It simply does not matter for purposes of the research whether the sociologist
adheres to a religion that is under study, adheres to some other religion, or has no religion at all. All religions are human, and so all religions can be studied. Professional sociology is also a pursuit that is carried on seriously. Easy answers that have a merely rhetorical appeal or that are arrived at simply may in some cases be correct, but not because of their appeal or ease. More often than not they are wrong. If one believes that one’s own religion has survived the ages because it is the true one, there is a certain appeal in that; however, the sociologist would look for the social processes at work in that history of survival. If one believes that it is all a matter of reinforcement, that people believe because they are rewarded for believing, much like a rodent that runs through a maze because it is fed whenever it does so, that analysis has an appeal based on its simplicity—and some undergraduate students major in behavioral psychology because they can readily master that kind of explanation. But that will not do because it does not really explain why one set of activities is “rewarded” and another set not. Something that explains everything explains nothing.

The sociology of religion is essentially sociology, no different from other areas in the discipline except that it takes religious activity as its matter of inquiry. And what is religion? There is a debate about that. Some define it in terms of ultimate concerns, others in terms of belief and cultivation of what is taken to be the divine. Still others argue it performs a function of culturally integrating people under values. I have argued elsewhere that it is an orientation of the mind toward what extends beyond the possibility of and mental powers of comprehension. For the purposes of the history that follows, what matters is that the people of the United States in the past century took a number of traditions, mostly Jewish and Christian traditions and ones analogous to them in other parts of the globe, to be religious. Using that as our criterion for what is religion, we have a procedure that is not philosophically elegant but enables us to understand a given history.

As I said above, the widespread suspicion that a scientific sociology of religion would be an implausible endeavor lay under much of the story to be told. When sociologists organized themselves in a professional society in 1906, transforming a caucus inside the American Economic Association into a free-standing American Sociological Society (now American Sociological

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1 Unwittingly exemplifying the suspicious regard mentioned above, an anonymous reviewer engaged by the publisher questioned what I say here and expressed disbelief that the non-religious sociologist would have an analysis of religious phenomena that would not differ from that of the personally religious sociologist.