Chapter 5

Sociology of Religion in Great Britain: Interdisciplinarity and Gradual Diversification

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Great Britain comprises England, Scotland and Wales, with distinct yet interconnected systems of higher education. In this chapter the terms Great Britain and Britain are used interchangeably. There has been little previous published work documenting the history of the British sociology of religion. British introductions to the sociology of religion tend to move from Marx, Weber and Durkheim through the evolutionists to Bryan Wilson, implying that nothing much happened in terms of British sociology of religion until the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is true to an extent, but it is not the full story. Hence, this chapter presents a richer background, pieced together from multiple sources.

In general terms, the sociology of religion follows the history of the institutionalization of disciplines and development of public universities in Britain alongside national and international events. It is distinctive in terms of its perennial disciplinary marginalization and connected overlap with anthropology, religious studies and theology. Hence, the chapter strives to focus on the study of religion within the discipline of sociology, but its inherent interdisciplinarity means that the story of British sociology of religion cannot be told without reference to these related fields. The sociology of religion continues to be sustained within theology and religious studies departments as mainstream sociological interest waxes and wanes over time. There are also intersections with history, philosophy and psychology. A maximal approach toward definition has been adopted for the chapter: any academic describing himself or herself as a sociologist of religion or engaging in the sociology of religion and any academic work which is sociological and related to religion produced from within a British university is considered a potential part of British sociology of religion.

Origins

According to Smith and Holmwood (2013: 18): “the very foundations of sociology are rooted in an ‘othering’ of religion and everything else ‘pre-Enlighten-
ment,’ while keeping liberal Protestantism’s outlook and progressivism.” Budd (1973: 19) regards David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757), in which religion is depicted as an intellectual error as primitive peoples responded to a natural order they could not understand or control, as a stage between the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century progressive and evolutionary schemes of religion.

The origins of British sociology of religion are bound up with rationalism, positivism, empiricism, liberalism, socialism, philanthropy, and social reform. In nineteenth-century Britain, science emerged as a separate, secular domain promoted by “rationalists, who created the potent myths of science” (Budd 1973: 126). As part of this process, scientific societies and journals proliferated, and anthropology, psychology and sociology became distinct disciplines.

Stephen Turner (2014) traces a mix of influences – positivism from Auguste Comte, liberalism from Herbert Spencer, and romanticism from John Ruskin – contributing to its enduring distinctiveness from American sociology. Consequently, symbolism, arts and crafts, concern with museums and education, and a critique of Luther and his doctrine of justification by faith continue to appear in mainstream British sociological texts. A seemingly contradictory blend of commitment to social progress and the scientific method, on the one hand, and nostalgia for preindustrial face-to-face communities continues to resonate, affecting British sociology’s engagement with religion. According to Turner, Comte, Spencer and Ruskin all employed a functional understanding of religion, but Comte and Ruskin understood it as a source of social unity, solidarity and morality in a way that Spencer did not. Hence, though Comte outlined an evolutionary progress of society away from religious thinking, he still believed that it was necessary to have a substitute for religion for consensus and authority, hence he proposed his “Religion of Humanity.” A leading figure in the establishment of British sociology, Patrick Geddes attended a branch of the Religion of Humanity in England until 1940 (Turner 2014: 102). Harriet Martineau was a nineteenth-century English social theorist who wrote about religion and moved in the same circles as Herbert Spencer. She is not referenced in most introductions to the sociology of religion, but her contribution is worth noting here as she translated Comte’s *The Positive Philosophy* (1853) into English, but omitted the last ten pages as she rejected his Religion of Humanity.

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1 Davie (2000) regards British sociology as lying between that of the US and Europe. British sociology of religion shares in common with the sociology of religion in America attention to English-speaking literature, but its attention to a majority church is more in keeping with research in other Western European contexts.