CONCEPT-CENTRIC OR METHOD-CENTRIC RESEARCH?
ON PARADIGM WAR IN THE INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY
OF/ RESEARCH ON RELIGION

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION AS A FIELD OF INTERDISCIPLINARY
AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL RESEARCH

Social sciences are attempting through research to inquire, to discover
and to document the inter-connection amongst social phenomena.
The limits of knowledge, its means of acquisition and the interpersonal
character of perception of what is objective are all subjected to reflexive
thinking (Jupp 2006) and epistemological interest, precisely because it
is the objective knowledge of reality that is the goal. In the service of
this goal, reflexive thinking is an epistemological principle which con-
tinually questions all research aspects including research settings,
researchers’ biases, social representations, and scientific assumptions.
Furthermore, there is an exhaustive scrutiny not only of the parts of the
research but also of the role of the research itself in the greater social
function, posing the paradigm of social sciences within the inquiring
sociological scope. The ways through which methodological aporia is
intellectually patterned and the accuracy and validity of how the
research is defined, stand at the center of research interest.

The specific field of the sociology of religion is – par excellence –
multidimensional. It is a field where multiple social factors and causal
relations interpenetrate and both macro- and micro- sociological study
can be developed. The structures, the values of each individual, the
political, social and other agencies interact towards the formation of
the social data relevant to each religion. The general image of the reli-
gious field in the contemporary world seems fluid, pluralistic and
multi-faceted.

Among the core challenges in the social study of religion are a) to
discern and explain “the diverse and complex patterns that are found in
the religious aspects of human living” (Davie 2007: 111), b) to define
basic conceptual constructs and to face relevant epistemological
questions (e.g. what social practices can be described as religious, how
religious phenomena are socially expressed and c) to develop the appropriate methodological approaches for the use of social research, or methodologies to examine religion as “an empirically observable social fact” (Dillon 2003: 7).

Social phenomena associated with religion have been studied from a range of different – even controversial – theoretical disciplines. Consequently, the relevant concepts have been generated and influenced by a wide range of philosophical, political and social convictions and assumptions. Given this situation, however, the use of the concept “paradigm” in sociology faces a fundamental problem of inadaptability: according to T. Kuhn’s theory (Kuhn 1996[1962]: 10–11), what is called “paradigm” is a coherent account of reality approved and defined by scientific consensus that generates patterns of inquiry and models of scientific practice, rules and concepts. All the above are at the disposal of experts as recognized and applicable components of one paradigm. In the circumstances though, how does one account for the fact that there is no overarching paradigm on which all sociologists would agree? Under the light of this question, the recognition of sociology as a multi-paradigmatic science comes as an answer to the challenge of sociology to study the social life of human beings. To the extent that it is acceptable that human life is pluralistic, non-deterministic and up to a point unpredictable, the explanatory attempts of the social sciences can also sound pluralistic. The basic argument of G. Ritzer in favour of such a prospect is that sociology consists of multiple paradigms and theories and at the same time is a coherent and comprehensive science (Ritzer 1980[1974]; Ritzer 1975). In social theory, paradigms do not chronically succeed one another, each negating the one before, but they contribute to the pluralistic, dynamic and inclusive character of the science (Ritzer and Smart 2001: 4).

In particular, the sociology of religion, like any other sociological sub-discipline, integrates a plethora of theories and paradigms without ever putting to the test its scientific character. On the contrary, “It is precisely the plurality and contradictory character of extra- and intra-disciplinary discourses that invalidates the fusion between knowledge and power” (Mouzelis 2007: 25), a fact that saturates social theory with reflexive criteria of epistemology in order for competing theories to be assessed.

The interdisciplinarity of sociological thought in the field of scientific research into religious expressions derives from the fact that the social phenomena connected to a specific religion come into being