II. A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Church Attendance Patterns in the United States and France*

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One of the major measure of religious involvement is the degree to which an individual or a group attends religious services (Brown, 1922: 25–26; Argyle, 1959) in part because, unlike religious self-involvement and beliefs, attendance refers to actual behavior.

The behavioral nature of church service attendance is a significant one, since other measures of religiosity1 may be relatively ambiguous. An example

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1 For a bibliography of articles dealing with church attendance patterns in America, see Howard Bahr (1970) and Wingrove and Alston (1974). Robertson (1970: 52) takes issue with the use of attendance as a measure of religiosity. Church attendance can be used as...
of such ambiguity is the use of self-identification as a measure of religious interest or religiosity. Ostensibly, a person can define himself as a member of a religious group and yet be relatively untouched by religion in his daily life (Luckmann, 1967: 103). An example of this position is the fact that while nearly all Americans define themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, the proportion of actual membership is much lower, and the proportion of actual involvement much lower still.

In this context, this paper will compare the extent of religiosity (as defined by church attendance) in America and in France. In so doing, we will both measure the extent of church attendance in these two countries and also attempt to define several socioeconomic sources of cross-cultural attendance patterns.

There are a number of advantages in using a respondent’s church attendance patterns as a measure of religiosity. Such patterns are easily attainable and are based partly on behavior, though the respondent answers in terms of his memory. However, we hold the position that it is better to attempt to measure behavior rather than only attitudes or beliefs.

As an example of the ambiguity of using only self-defined beliefs, a 1958 survey of the French population found that twenty-one percent of those who defined themselves as “certain” atheists also defined themselves as Catholics; almost half (45%) of the “uncertain” atheists did the same (Wylie and Begue, 1970: see chapter 26). On the other hand, attendance can reflect either a person’s religiosity or his acceptance of the clergy’s legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1971).

We recognize that not all church service attendances are indices of religious feelings (Stark, 1972: 301); at least some religious activities are more familial and social in nature than religious, and a religious function may in fact not be defined as religious by the actor. Attending a friend’s funeral may express amity rather than a high degree of religiosity: church-sponsored activities may be the only activities available in a small community.

Moreover, many Europeans attend church services only when they or their friends and relatives achieve a new position or status in society. These changes refer to those changes in a person’s life cycle which are recognized by religion: baptisms, marriages, and funerals. Such status changes are often more secular than religious, for they consist of family and community recognition of rites of passages. While supported and sponsored by a religious organization, they do little to reflect (or increase) a person’s religious feelings. As a consequence, we will be interested in those respondents who say they attend religious services once a week or more often, rather than those respondents who seldom attend.

It is recognized that western European countries differ in their extent of church attendance (Gustad, 1968; Williams, 1969: see chapter 18) and that most Europeans seldom attend religious services except for highly social and ritualistic purposes. For example, only three percent of church members in Sweden attend Sunday church services, but most (85%) children are baptised, and nearly all (90%) weddings and all (95%) funerals are conducted by the church (Gustafsson, 1969: 363). Thus, the century-long trend of entkirchlichung...