WHY ISN'T RELIGION AN INDEPENDENT VARIABLE?

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In "Religion as an Independent Variable" (1998) Daniel Krymkowski and Luther Martin make two main claims: that religion has not been shown to be an independent variable, and that Max Weber, touted as the inspiration for this view among social scientists, does not himself always deem religion an independent variable.

1. Religion as independent and dependent variable

The force of both claims rests on the meaning of the term "independent variable," which Krymkowski and Martin use in varying ways. When they use the term tamely, their claim that religion is not an independent variable is provocative, whether or not persuasive. But when they use the term radically, their claim is banal.

By religion as an independent variable, Krymkowski and Martin profess to mean the tame assertion that "religious ideas and practices are postulated ... to have a significant effect upon social relationships and material culture" (1998: 187). It would be bold for them to be rejecting an assertion this mild. But in their criticism of existing social scientific studies that make religion an independent variable, they jump to two far more radical assertions: that religion is the only independent variable, and that religion is an independent variable. It would scarcely be daring for them to be rejecting an assertion so extreme, so extreme that no one makes it.

Krymkowski and Martin must at least be arguing against the radical assertion that religion is the sole independent variable. For their argument is that other, secular causes are also at work. Thus they argue that in America the high rates of attendance at church and even of belief in God are attributable as much to American culture as to either religiosity or a particular variety of religiosity. But they do not merely add Americanness to religiosity as the cause. They substitute Americanness for religiosity, which is thereby demoted from the sole independent variable to none at all:
For Americans, going to church seems not unlike participation in any other special interest group. To put it succinctly, religious institutions are but one small part of the larger social matrix of institutions in the United States, all of which reflect and reinforce dominant cultural values. Isolated from this matrix, religion is unlikely to act as an independent variable having a major impact upon individuals. For instance, Welch and Leege... examined “religious imagery” in their study of the effect of religion on political attitudes. One important independent variable in their research was a measure of whether the respondent sees God primarily as a judge.... But why is this necessarily a religious belief? First of all, believing in God seems to have more to do with being an American than with being religious, since about 95% of Americans claim to have some sort of a belief in God. (1998: 191)

The high rates among Americans of church attendance and belief in God have long been noted. How odd it would be if social scientists struck by these rates—especially compared with those in Western Europe—attributed them exclusively to religiosity and not at all to Americanness. “Isolated” from the “matrix” of “institutions in the United States,” religion is indeed unlikely to “act as an independent variable.” But who is so isolating religion? Krymkowski and Martin name no one who does. No wonder. To isolate religion in this way would be to assert that religion is the only independent variable. Krymkowski and Martin are proud of their refutation of this assertion, but the radicalness of it makes their rejection tame—and explains why they need only pose a rhetorical question to refute it.

In the process of effortlessly refuting the radical assertion that religion is not the sole independent variable at work, Krymkowski and Martin jump illogically to the conclusion that religion is not at all an independent variable—as if the assertion in question were now the tame assertion that religion is at least one of the independent variables: “after a good deal of thought, we have come to believe that religion, operationalized in standard ways, is not likely to exert independent causal influence on attitudes and behavior” (1998: 190-191). Of course, Krymkowski and Martin may really mean that religion is not a major cause of attitudes and behavior when it is isolated from other causes. If so, they should make clear this severe qualification, which would then leave them with a claim disputed by no one: that religion never operates apart from the rest of life.

If, as seems more likely, Krymkowski and Martin mean that, even in conjunction with other causes, religion is not a major cause of attitudes and behavior, their claim is truly provocative, but so pro-