THE INTEGRATION OF ETHNICITY: NOTES ON A SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC OPPORTUNITY FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Differentiating once and for all a social science of religion from the history of religions and certainly from theology remains a conceptual and methodological difficulty. Fortunately, this will have to occur at a time when the "main line" disciplines have taken up inter-disciplinary methodology, and have opened their horizons to permit the foundation of numerous new sub-disciplines. Not only will scholars of religion have to forge working relationships across fields, they will have to show that these connexions are capable of producing research of empirical utility.

An excellent opportunity for such collaboration has arisen in the last two decades with the enthusiasm for "ethnicity" sometimes manifested in minority or ethnic studies. The existence of a myriad of nationalist and sub-nationalist movements in both western and developing areas has necessitated greater interest on the part of political scientists and sociologists in historical and cultural facets. The study of ethnic movements is complex: what is now called ethno-nationalism, especially by the anthropology contingent, is not satisfactorily explained via the approaches of the Frankfurt School: while analyses too dependent on issues of economy and class have always shown limited predictive ability in the Third World, ethno-nationalism has displayed a western kettle of fish not altogether "western." For instance, the Northern Irish Republican movement cannot be completely grasped via the relative deprivation focus of Gurr: deprivation is most definitely a strong and tenacious aspect; however, the models involved simply do not account for ongoing mobilization. The same is true of Sri Lanka's broadly supported ethno-nationalist movement: the Tamil minority have been deprived, akin to

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Ulster’s Catholics, for many decades. The forces promoting micro-mobilization and the formation of comprehensive ideology, especially of the insurgent variety, are not immediately recognizable. What is important to religious studies is that both movements, typical of contemporary ethno-nationalist movements, do involve pervasive and sometimes not quickly perceivable religious features.

Anthony Smith’s decade of contributions to “ethnic” or “ethnicity theory” has culminated in a position whereby it is argued that contemporary nationalism is civil or ethnic religion (1990). In contrast with Marxian predictions of international boundaries being dissolved by the emergence of post-industrial, less class-oriented societies, the opposite appears to be occurring. Nationalism, rather than drawing together segmented societies according to a 19th and 20th century European pattern, is found to be a splintering, divisive phenomenon. An educated, materially-sated “global class” may never be solidified. Issues of “self-determination” are now more likely to be placed in cultural as opposed to economic and/or governmental terms. For instance, the secessionist ideologies of the Basques, Québécois, and Kurds, have been formulated in cultural dimensions in the awareness of a distinct collective identity. It is most significant that many separatist groups and the peoples they represent actually stand to suffer economically from the realization of separatist ambitions. Similarly, in the 1970s Nairn and Hechter noted that the foundations of Welsh and Scottish nationalism were decidedly amaterial: ethnicity and nationalism combined to form an ethnic religion underlain by conceptions of non-Anglo-Saxon primordial origins and a non-English developmental experience.

Smith has placed special emphasis on the cohesive and mobilizing power of what he describes as “ethnic myth” (1984). All ethno-nationalist movements constitute those causes having over time created such a body of beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, the connexion of ethnic myth and ideology is intimate—occasionally, they may prove to be practically identical. Scholars of religious studies in their great familiarity with topics of myth in general, in a greater consciousness of myth as a general cultural condition, offer expertise in sifting through patterns of myth in relation to texts. Connexions between myth and ethno-nationalist ritual and symbolism are predictably well understood by those whose business it is to view myth in terms of content and function. While the Durkheimian position has been well taken up by political anthropology (Kertzer), scholars of religion may offer different viewpoints with regard to what is of a continuum or what is novel given a greater historical tendency true of religious studies in general. In the same sense, Victor