Grace Davie

"The Sociology of Religion"

Sage Publications 2007

Chapter Two

two

common sources/different pathways

The following discussion is as much about the sociology of knowledge as it is about the sociology of religion. It is concerned with the early developments of the sub-discipline and the ways in which this has evolved in different parts of the world and in different academic communities. It is divided into three sections. The first deals with the founding fathers, notably Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and (more briefly) Georg Simmel. Certain points need firm underlining if the work of these pioneers is to be properly understood, not least the association between the early development of sociology and the European context from which it emerged. It is the same factor, moreover (or rather its absence), that accounts for the very different directions that the sociology of religion has taken in other parts of the world and in different academic environments.

The second section will outline these contrasting trajectories in more detail, notably those discovered in Europe (itself diverse) and in the United States. In accordance with the dominant theme of this book, both sections will pay particular attention to the complex relationships that exist between the different ways of being religious, the various theoretical perspectives that emerge to explain what is happening, and the markedly different topics that dominate the agenda as a result. The geographically contingent nature of the material will form a crucial thread in the argument; so too linguistic influences. It follows that the generalization of any such approaches to other parts of the world cannot simply be assumed, a point that will resonate repeatedly.

The third section closes the loop. It does so by interrogating the relevance of the founding fathers at the start of the twenty-first as opposed to the twentieth century. To what extent do the frames of reference set out at the onset of industrialization in Europe help us to understand the transformations in religious life taking place almost a 100 years later? The question will be posed first in general terms. The argument is continued with reference to selected texts that work within the themes laid out by the founding fathers, but using these in innovative ways to understand the realities of late as opposed to early modernity.

THE FOUNDING FATHERS

The beginnings of sociology are firmly rooted in the transformations of European society as the constituent nations of the continent embarked, each in its own way, on the industrialization process. Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel were participant observers of this massive upheaval, sharing a common aim: to comprehend more fully the processes that were taking place, and to establish a discipline that could enhance this understanding. What was happening? Why was it happening in some places rather than others? And what were the likely consequences for different groups of people? All four concluded moreover that the religious factor was a central feature at every level of this process – in terms, that is, of the changes taking place, the reasons for these transformations and their implications for human living.

It is important to remember that Karl Marx (1818–1883) predates the others by at least a generation. There are two essential elements in the Marxist perspective on religion: the first is descriptive, the second evaluative. Marx conceptualized religion as a dependent variable; in other words its form and nature are dependent on social and above all economic relations, which constitute the bedrock of social analysis. Nothing can be understood apart from the economic order and the relationship of the capitalist/worker to the means of production. The second aspect follows from this but contains an important evaluative element. Religion is a form of alienation; it is a symptom of social malformation which disguises the exploitative relationships of capitalist society. Religion persuades people that such relationships are natural and, therefore, acceptable. It follows that the real causes of social distress cannot be tackled until the religious element in society is stripped away to reveal the injustices of the capitalist system; everything else is a distraction. Both ideas are brought together in one of the most famous quotations of the sociological literature.

> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people.
>
> To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of tears, the halo of which is religion (Marx and Engels, 1975: 38).

Subsequent debates concerning Marx's approach to religion have, however, to be approached with care. It has become increasingly difficult to

distinguish between (a) Marx's own analysis of religious phenomena, (b) a subsequent school of Marxism as a form of sociological thinking and (c) what has occurred in the twentieth century in the name of Marxism as a political ideology. The essential and enduring point to grasp from Marx himself is that religion cannot be understood apart from the world of which it is part; this is a crucial sociological insight and central to the evolution of the sub-discipline. It needs, however, to be distinguished from an over-deterministic interpretation of Marx which postulates the dependence of religion on economic forces in mechanical terms. This is unhelpful. An additional point is more political: it may indeed be the case that one function of religion is to mitigate the very evident hardships of this world and so disguise them. Marx was correct to point this out. Nowhere, however, does Marx legitimate the destructive doctrines of those Marxist regimes which maintained that the only way to reveal the true injustices of society was to destroy – sometimes with hideous consequences – the religious element of society. Marx himself took a longer term view, claiming that religion would disappear of its own accord given the advent of the classless society: quite simply it would no longer be necessary. The inevitable confusions between Marx, Marxism and Marxist regimes have, however, had a profound effect on the reception of Marx's ideas in the twentieth century. The total, dramatic and unforeseen collapse of Marxism as an effective political creed in 1989 is but the last twist in a considerably longer tale.

A significant breakthrough in Marxist thinking about religion can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), a founder of the Italian Communist Party, who died in prison under the fascist regime in Italy. Gramsci gives far more weight than earlier Marxists to the autonomous nature of the superstructure – i.e. the world of ideologies, culture, religion and politics – affirming its capacities to exert influence independently of economic forces. More precisely, the concept of 'hegemony' is central to Gramsci's thinking, by which he means the process through which a dominant class, or elite, strive to maintain their hold on political life, by exploiting public opinion or the popular consensus. The process is so total that the status quo is considered 'normal' – it is beyond question.

Religion can be used to attack as well as to affirm the dominant world view. Disaffected religious groups become critical of the dominant elite in the name of new ideas and new theologies. Or to use Gramsci's own terminology, organic (as opposed to traditional) intellectuals can assist an oppressed group in awakening a revolutionary consciousness. One example of this way of thinking can be seen in the Christian–Marxist

dialogue, which became an important conversation for significant groups of post-war intellectuals.[1] Liberation theologians exemplified this trend. The factors that encouraged such exchanges were, however, symptomatic of a particular period. Bit by bit, the atmosphere changed again: on the one hand, Catholic authorities became increasingly opposed to communism; on the other, Marxism was rapidly losing its credibility. Each of these has encouraged the other to produce very different formulations, notably in Latin America (see Chapter 10).

Max Weber's (1864–1920) contribution to the sociology of religion is in many respects part of the same debate: Weberian formulae have prospered as Marxist ideas become more problematic. The similarities between Marx and Weber are, however, as important as the differences. More precisely, Weber's theorizing about the place of religion in human society vindicates much of what Marx himself suggested, as opposed to the vulgarizations of later Marxists (those who insisted on a somewhat simplistic economic determinism). Above all, Weber stresses the multicausality of social phenomena, including religion; in so doing he conclusively refutes the standpoint of what he calls 'reflective materialism' whereby the religious dimensions of social living simply reflect the material (Giddens, 1971: 211). The causal sequence is not, however, simply reversed. Indeed the emergence of what Weber calls 'elective affinities' between material and religious interests are entirely compatible with Marx's own understanding of ideology. The connections between particular ways of thinking (including religious ones) and the material interests of particular groups of people are not random: they are mutually reinforcing and mutually advantageous.

Weber's influence spread into every corner of sociology, including the sociology of religion, generating a huge secondary literature – the remarks that follow are inevitably skeletal. Absolutely central, however, to Weber's understanding of religion is the conviction that this aspect of human living can be constituted as something other than, or separate from, society or 'the world'. Three points follow from this. First the relationship between religion and the world is contingent and variable; how a particular religion relates to the surrounding context will vary over time and in different places. Secondly, this relationship can only be examined in its historical and cultural specificity. Documenting the details of these relationships (of which elective affinities are but one example) becomes, therefore, the central and very demanding task of the sociologist of religion. Thirdly, the relationship between the two spheres, religion and society, is being steadily eroded in modern societies. This erosion, to the point where the religious factor ceases to be an effective force in society, lies at the heart of the process known as

secularization – through which the world becomes progressively 'disenchanted'. The latter point quite clearly reflects Weber's own, and essentially European, experience of the modernization process.

These three assumptions underpin Weber's *magnum opus* in the field, *The Sociology of Religion* (Weber, 1963), that is his comparative study of the major world faiths and their impact on everyday behaviour in different parts of the world. It is at this point, moreover, that the question of definition outlined at the end of the previous chapter begins to resonate, for it is clear that, de facto at least, Weber is working with a substantive definition of religion, despite his well-known unwillingness to provide a definition as such (Weber, 1963: 1). He is concerned with the way that the *content* (or substance) of a particular religion, or more precisely religious ethic, influences the way that people behave, both individually and collectively. In other words different types of belief have different outcomes. Weber goes on to elaborate this theme: the relationship between ethic and behaviour not only exists, it is socially patterned and contextually varied. Central to Max Weber's understanding in this respect is the complex relationship between a set of religious beliefs and the particular social stratum which becomes the principal carrier of such beliefs in any given society, the elective affinities already referred to. The sociologist's task is to identify the crucial social stratum and the ethic that they choose to adopt at the key moment in history; it requires careful comparative analysis.

Weber's celebrated work on the Protestant ethic should be seen in this light. It is but one example of a more general theme – one, however, which has become seminal to the sociology of religion. The case study became known in the English speaking world largely through the translation of Talcott Parsons (published in 1930), since when it has generated a seemingly endless debate both within and beyond the sociology of religion (Swatos et al., 1998). Bearing such controversies in mind, it is important to appreciate what the Protestant ethic thesis does and doesn't say. It does *not* argue that Protestantism (or more precisely Calvinism) in itself caused modern capitalism to develop; it does suggest that certain types of action, themselves the result of deeply held religious beliefs, were a crucial part of a complex causal process that resulted in the emergence of new forms of economic life in early modern Europe which were to transform, in the fullness of time, the global economy. The *principle* embedded in the Protestant ethic thesis is even more important than the content: that is the possibility that any system of religious belief can, in theory, engender forms of action that have an important impact in everyday life, including the economic sphere. Whether they do or not has to be determined empirically.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), the exact contemporary of Weber, began from a very different position. Working outwards from his study of totemic religion among Australian Aborigines, he became convinced above all of the binding qualities of religion, through which people form societies. In other words, his perspective is a functional one. Durkheim is concerned above all with what religion does; it binds people together. What then will happen when time-honoured forms of society begin to mutate so fast that traditional patterns of religion inevitably collapse? How will the essential functions of religion be fulfilled? This was the situation confronting France in the early part of the twentieth century – as a supporter of the Third Republic Durkheim was looking for a coherent moral base for the new, essentially secular, regime in the difficult conditions of the First World War. Hence the significance of his work in public (educational) as well as sociological debate.

Durkheim responded to his own question as follows: the religious aspects of society should be allowed to evolve alongside everything else, in order that the symbols of solidarity appropriate to the developing social order (in this case incipient industrial society and a secular state) may emerge.[2] The theoretical position follows from this: religion as such will always be present for it performs a necessary *function*. The precise nature of that religion will, however, differ between one society and another and between different periods of time in order to achieve an appropriate 'fit' between religion and the prevailing social order. The systemic model, so dear to functionalists, is immediately apparent.

Of the early sociologists, Durkheim was the only one to provide his own definition of religion. It has two elements: '[A] religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things which are set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, 1976: 47). First there is the celebrated distinction between the sacred (the set apart) and the profane (everything else); there is an element of substantive definition at this point. The sacred, however, enjoys a *functional* quality not possessed by the profane; by its very nature it has the capacity to bind, for it unites the collectivity in a set of beliefs and practices which are centred on the sacred object. Acting collectively in a moral community, following Durkheim, is of greater sociological importance than the object of such actions. The uncompromisingly 'social' aspects of Durkheim's thinking are both an advantage and disadvantage. The focus is clearly distinguishable from the psychological (a good thing), but the repeated emphasis on society as a reality *sui generis* brings with it the risk of a different sort of reductionism – taken to its logical conclusion religion is nothing more than the symbolic expression of social experience. Such a conclusion disturbed many of Durkheim's contemporaries; it is still to some extent problematic, and for sociologists as well as theologians.

Less attention has been paid to Georg Simmel's (1858–1918) work on religion until relatively recently. There were good reasons, however, for a revival in interest towards the end of the twentieth century, given that Simmel's approach encapsulates the ambiguities both of modernity itself and of the place of religion within this. At one and the same time, he is concerned with the permanence and the fluidity of religious life. The dialectical distinctions between content and form (religiosity and religion), between individual and group, between self and other, and between reason and emotions are central to this analysis. Simmel argues that religion as such emerges through the structuration of the underlying spiritual aspirations of individuals; religiosity and the state of mind that it refers to precede the institutional forms that are associated with religion.

It follows that modern people are not necessarily less religious than their forebears, but differently so as the forms of religion mutate together with the society of which they are part. Changes in religious forms are part and parcel of the shifts taking place in modern societies as life becomes increasingly segmentalized. Specifically religious concerns are differentiated from other aspects of life and become more and more individualized; no longer are they determined by kinship or neighbourhood ties. Whether these changes free or enslave the individual becomes a central theme in Simmel's work – at one level the individual escapes the stultifying restriction of the pre-modern community, including its religious forms; at another this very freedom leads to a world of objects that by their very nature constrain and dominate both needs and desires. Much of Simmel's sociology is concerned with these dilemmas which become most acute in urban life – hence his preoccupation with the city. It is here that 'objective' culture is most likely to acquire a life of its own and to dominate or alienate the subjective spirit. Half optimistic and half pessimistic about what he saw, Simmel's prescience about the ambiguities of urban living and the place of religion within this, anticipates very accurately the debates of late modernity.

a note on translation

It is already clear that the evolution of the sociology of religion cannot be understood without extensive knowledge of the founding fathers and an appreciation of their continuing influence (see below). The availability of their writing should not, however, be taken for granted; it depended on competent translations. A good and very positive example can be found

in Talcott Parsons's role in introducing Weber to the English-speaking world. An effective précis of this story can be found in Swatos et al. (1998) – an analysis that explores the relationship between translations of Weber and their reception in a primarily American context, an environment in which the religious actor has always been given a central role. Hence not only the appeal of Weber's sociological thinking, but the increasing availability of his work, or to be more accurate parts of his work, at a relatively early stage in the development of the sub-discipline.[3]

Willaime (1999, 2004) and Hervieu-Léger and Willaime (2001) tell a very different story – this time underlining the relatively slow and at times painful reception of Weber by French sociologists, including those interested in religion. The lack of available translations until the late 1950s was, moreover, a symptom of something more profound: a visible incompatibility between Weber's ways of working and the preoccupations of French sociologists, a question that can be approached from several points of view – philosophical, political, academic, methodological and religious (Hervieu-Léger and Willaime, 2001: 64; Willaime, 2004). In short, what Weber proposed did not fit well in the intellectual climate of France, a milieu preoccupied by the opposition between religion (Catholicism) and modernity (the secular state) – the framework for Durkheim's sociological thinking. Weber, in contrast, was primarily concerned with the influence of a religious ethos on the habits and actions of individuals (religious actors). In the end it was the French sociologists interested in religious minorities, including Protestantism, who made greatest use of the Weberian perspective, not those working in the mainstream (Séguy, 1972).

It follows that a careful mapping of the dates of translations of key texts between German, French and English would reveal interesting combinations of theoretical resource in different European societies, as indeed in the United States. What was available to whom in the development of sociological thinking is not something that should be taken for granted; it could and should be subject to empirical investigation. Such studies are crucial to our understanding of the sociology of religion as a sub-discipline and become in themselves a significant element in the sociology of knowledge. The point is already important in connection with the classics; it is even more the case with respect to later developments.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS: OLD WORLD AND NEW

Whatever their differences, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel were all aware of the importance of religion to the functioning of human

societies and paid careful attention to this factor in their different analyses. Such commitment cannot, however, simply be assumed – by no means all of the subsequent generation shared this interest or recognized the importance of religion to sociological thinking. Indeed almost half a century passed before a second wave of activity took place. It came, moreover, from a very different quarter – from within the churches themselves. A second point is immediately apparent: the churches themselves were in a very different position on each side of the Atlantic, leading to very different preoccupations for American scholars on the one hand and for Europeans on the other.

American developments

In the United States, for example, where religious institutions remained relatively buoyant and where religious practice continued to grow, sociologists of religion in the early twentieth century were both motivated by and concerned with the social gospel. A second, less positive, theme ran parallel – one in which religion became increasingly associated with the social divisions of American society. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Niebuhr, 1929) and rather later *Social Class in American Protestantism* (Demerath, 1965) are titles that represent this trend. Demerath – a second generation sociologist in the United States – was one of the first to use survey research in the understanding of religion in order to establish the social correlates of religious activity.

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, the principal focus of American sociology lay in the normative functionalism of Talcott Parsons, who stressed above everything the integrative role of religion. Religion, a functional prerequisite, was central to the complex models of social systems and social action elaborated by Parsons. In bringing together these two elements (i.e. social systems and social action), Parsons is drawing on both Durkheim and Weber. Or, as Lechner puts this, 'Durkheim came to provide the analytical tools for Parsons's ambivalent struggle with Weber' (1998: 353). Ambivalent this struggle may have been, but Parsons's influence was lasting; it can be seen in subsequent generations of scholars, notably Robert Bellah (in America) and Niklaus Luhmann (in Germany). The relationship with American society is particularly important. The functionalism of Parsons emerged from a social order entirely different from either the turbulence of rapid modernization that motivated the founding fathers or the long-term confrontations between church and state in the Catholic nations of Europe, most notably in France; post-war America symbolized a relatively settled period of industrialism in which consensus appeared not only desirable but

possible. The assumption that the social order should be underpinned by religious values was widespread and to a large extent convincing.

Such optimism did not last. As the 1960s gave way to a far less confident decade, the sociology of religion shifted once again – this time to the social construction of meaning systems epitomized by the work of Berger and Luckmann. The Parsonian model is inverted; social order exists but it is constructed from below. So constructed, religion offers believers crucial explanations and meanings which they use to make sense of their lives, especially during times of personal or social crisis. Hence the idea of religion as a form of 'sacred canopy' that shields both individual and society from 'the ultimately destructive consequences of a seemingly chaotic, purposeless existence' (Karlenzig, 1998: 52). The mood of the later 1970s, profoundly shaken by the oil crisis and its effects on economic growth, reflects this need for meaning or purpose – no longer could these simply be assumed. The 1970s merged, moreover, into the modern period, a world in which conflict, including religious conflict, rather than consensus dominates the agenda. Religion has not only become increasingly prominent, but increasingly contentious both within societies and between them. Models that assumed a religious consensus, one that could be handed on intact from one generation to the next, are less and less able to resonate.

Berger's contribution to the debate on secularization and his subsequent change of mind will be considered in more detail in the following chapters. One point, however, requires immediate attention, namely the assumed connections between pluralization and secularization. Berger, like many others, maintained in his early work that the two ideas were mutually reinforcing. An increase in religious choice necessarily undermined the taken-for-grantedness of religion. It followed that an increase in religious pluralism would lead to greater secularization – to the extent that the protective canopy became both less sacred (i.e. less able to protect either individuals or societies from the threat of chaos or societal disintegration) and less able to discipline the beliefs and behaviour of individuals (hence a tendency to look elsewhere, itself a stimulus to pluralism). A downward spiral was taken for granted. This assumption and its later critique have become a touchstone in the evolution of the sub-discipline – the argument will form a central theme in the theoretical sections of this book.

One point, however, remains clear: compared with most Europeans, Americans not only enjoy almost limitless choice but remain active in their religious lives. Just how active is not always easy to say and reflects important methodological issues (see Chapters 5 and 7), but in the modern United States, the notion that pluralism necessarily generates

religious decline becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. Quite simply, it hasn't happened.

European assumptions

Unsurprisingly, the assumptions of European sociologists of religion are radically different. So too the point of departure, which can be found in the titles published in France in the early years of the war. The most celebrated of these, *La France, Pays de Mission* (Godin and Daniel, 1943), illustrates the mood of a growing group within French Catholicism who were increasingly worried by the weakening position of the Catholic Church in French society. Anxiety proved, however, a powerful motivator. In order that the situation might be remedied, accurate information was essential; hence a whole series of enquiries under the direction of Gabriel Le Bras with the intention of discovering what exactly characterized the religion of the people, or lived religion (*la religion vécue*) as it became known.

The importance of Le Bras's work is recognized by Hervieu-Léger and Willaime (2001), though even for these authors, his inclusion among the sociological 'classics' requires some justification. This they find in his three-fold contribution: in his meticulous enumeration and mapping of Catholicism in France, in his institutionalization and encouragement of the sociology of religion, and finally in the historical dimensions of his work. The energy devoted to the gathering of accurate information acquired, however, a momentum of its own, which led to certain tensions. There were those, in France and elsewhere, whose work remained motivated by pastoral concern; there were others who felt that knowledge was valuable for its own sake and resented the ties to the Catholic Church. What emerged in due course was an independent section within the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), the Groupe de Sociologie *des Religions*. The change in title was significant: 'religious sociology' became 'the sociology of religions' in the plural. There was, however, continuity as well as change. The initial enthusiasm for mapping, for example, which began with Boulard and Le Bras on rural Catholicism (see, for example, Boulard, 1945), and continued through the work of Boulard and Rémy on urban France (1968), culminated in the magnificent *Atlas de la pratique religieuse des catholiques en France* (Isambert, 1980). Alongside such cartographical successes developed explanations for the geographical differences which emerged. These explanations were primarily historical, their sources lay deep within regional cultures. There was nothing superficial about this analysis which could, quite clearly, be applied to religions other than Catholicism.

Willaime (1995: 37–57, 1999), Voyé and Billiet (1999) and Hervieu-Léger and Willaime (2001) tell this primarily French (or more accurately francophone) story in more detail – that is the emergence of accurate and careful documentation motivated primarily by pastoral concerns, the establishment of the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions in Paris in 1954, the gradual extension of the subject matter beyond Catholicism, the development of a distinctive sociology of Protestantism, the methodological problems encountered along the way and finally the emergence of an international organization and the 'déconfessionalisation' of the sociology of religion. The evolution of the Conférence International de Sociologie Religieuse, founded in Leuven in 1948, through the Conférence Internationale de Sociologie des Religions (1981) to the present Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions (1989) epitomizes this story. It marks a shift from a group primarily motivated by religion to one that is motivated by science, an entirely positive feature. It is, however, a story that emerges – and could only emerge – from a particular intellectual context, Catholic Europe. Such initiatives have been crucial to the development of the sociology of religion; they lead, however, to preoccupations that are not always shared by scholars from other parts of the world.

hybrid cases

The discussion so far has contrasted francophone Europe with the United States – two very different modernities as far as religion is concerned, engendering different ways of thinking about the subject. British sociologists of religion have a particular place within these parameters. It is clear, first of all, that they draw considerably on American (English-speaking) literature, but they operate necessarily in a European context – i.e. one of low levels of religious activity. In many respects, therefore, they face in two directions (see Davie, 2000b). They have been more influenced by pluralism than most of their continental colleagues, prompting a long-term preoccupation with new religious movements rather than popular religion; this fits well with the American literature. The levels of religious activity in Britain are, however, quite different from those in the United States and here the work of American scholars has proved less helpful. What is evident, however, is the inability of most (if not quite all) British – and American – scholars to access the sociological literature in any language other than their own. The question of translation continues to resonate. Most continental scholars can do better, leading to a noticeable imbalance in sociological writing. Many of the latter, for example, make reference to the English-speaking

literature in their work; the reverse is seldom the case until the pressure to provide an English language edition becomes overwhelming.

Britain is not the only 'hybrid' case. A second very obvious example can be found in Canada where the linguistic divide within the nation has led effectively to two academic establishments, each of which draws on a distinctive literature and each of which reflects the parameters of faith found in different parts of the country (Beyer, 1998). Interestingly, Beyer himself is trilingual in English, French and German, enabling him to cut right across both linguistic and cultural divisions. In Canada as a whole, however, each group of scholars has developed links with the appropriate language community outside the country – amongst which the links between the French-speaking universities of Québec and the French-speaking scholars in France, Belgium and Switzerland stand out. It was not by chance that the 1995 meeting of the Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions took place at the Université Laval in Québec City.

More generally Canada, like Australia and New Zealand, represents a mid-point in a continuum of state or elite control versus voluntarism. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Protestant communities of English-speaking Canada were not so very different from their counterparts in the United States – the possibilities for voluntarism were, and in some senses still are, real. Such tendencies were, however, counterbalanced by the hegemonic Catholic identity of French-speaking Québec, a subculture which persisted until the 1960s when it collapsed dramatically – secularization may have come late, but it came fast to French-speaking Canada. The closest parallel in Europe can be found in the Netherlands. Indeed Catholicism in general has played a far larger part in Canadian history that in her markedly more Protestant neighbour, an important reason for very different understandings of church and state and, without exaggeration, markedly different sociologies of religion (O'Toole, 1996).

Two further variations are interesting. First the German speakers who bring to the debate not only their unique experience of European life, but a distinctive body of theorizing. In terms of empirical data, Germany is a particularly interesting case, given the very different patterns of religious life that have emerged in the West and the former East. East Germany, for example, is without doubt the most secular country in Europe – Berlin has become the capital not only of secularity, but of secularism. It is tempting, but incorrect, to say that this is simply the consequence of aggressive secularization policies under communism, an argument that is difficult to sustain given the entirely different outcome in neighbouring Poland. East German secularism is more likely to be the result of a specific combination of factors: a Protestant rather than

Catholic tradition, a long rather than short history of secularization (McLeod, 1997, 2000; Froese and Pfaff, 2005) and the effects of communism itself.

Quite apart from the German data, two German-speaking sociologists have contributed massively to the sociology of religion in the late twentieth century. Both, moreover, are equally respected in general sociology. Thomas Luckmann, for instance, both in his work with Berger and alone has had a seminal influence on the development of sociology as a theorist, philosopher and methodologist.[4] Within the sociology of religion as such, he is best known for a slim but immensely influential volume published in English under the title *The Invisible Religion* (Luckmann, 1967). The text forms part of Luckmann's concerted effort to understand the locus of the individual in the modern world. Using approaches to religion which derive from the classics, Luckmann argues that the problem of individual existence in society is essentially a 'religious' one.

> It is in keeping with an elementary sense of the concept of religion to call the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism a religious phenomenon. ... We may, therefore, regard the social processes that lead to the formation of Self as fundamentally religious (1967: 48).

In making these claims, Luckmann aimed to re-establish the role of theory within the sociology of religion at a time when the dominant trend in the field lay in the empirical study of ever smaller (at least in the European case) religious organizations.

Niklaus Luhmann was born in the same year as Thomas Luckmann (1927). The influence of Talcott Parsons is clearly present in his writings – unsurprisingly given that Luhmann was Parsons's student in the 1960s. Luhmann went on, however, to develop a distinct and independent version of systems theory. Within this framework, he analyses religion in terms of its systemic functions, but conceptualizing systems not as groups of people but as the lines of communication between them. The specific character of religion as communication lies in the fact that it is both immanent and transcendent, i.e. that it operates between people (immanence), but that its subject lies beyond the world, concerned with managing and giving meaning to life (transcendence). The emphasis on meaning is crucially important in this highly abstract and at times very difficult body of theory.[5]

An interesting meeting between English- (primarily American) and German-speaking sociologists took place in New York in the spring of 2004.[6] This was both similar to and different from the encounters with the French speakers already described. As ever, the contrasts between

patterns of religious life in Europe and America formed a dominant theme, a debate which found its inspiration in the paradigms developed in Chapters 3 and 4 of this book. The discussion, however, was enriched by innovative theoretical contributions, many of which drew very specifically on German-speaking sociology. As a result, German as opposed to French issues came to the fore – in not only, for example, a continued awareness of the impact of contrasting religious traditions on the political and policy making spheres of European societies,[7] but also of the ongoing contribution made to German society by academic theologians, a 'species' that barely exists in France.

A final group of scholars, whose work in many ways draws the threads of this section together, can be found in those parts of Europe which until 1989 were under communist domination – a point already mentioned in connection with the German case. Their task is twofold – first to document the nature and forms of religion that are emerging in this part of the world, bearing in mind the volatility of these indicators and their considerable diversity across the region, and secondly, to establish theoretical frames of reference which enable a fuller understanding of what is happening in those parts of Europe where the study of religion had been proscribed from the academic agenda. This point reflects the remarks already made in Chapter 1 (p. 10). Here, however, the emphasis is different in so far as it lies primarily in the linguistic evolution that has accompanied these shifts.

Central European intellectuals born before the Second World War were part of a German-speaking community; they were socialized at a time when German was the lingua franca in this part of the world, permitting easy access to German scholarship – the driving force of European science, social science and philosophy. The Nazi regime, both before and during the war, definitively destroyed this hegemony with a two-fold consequence. The scholars of central Europe who remained at home became imprisoned in the Soviet Empire (thereby becoming Russian speakers); those who escaped to the United States contributed, consciously or not, to the dominance of English as the language of academic enquiry.

For Central and East Europeans the implications are clear. The new generation of scholars emerging since 1989 are rapidly turning into highly proficient English speakers and, as a result, draw increasingly on the associated literature. The possibilities for academic exchange with the West are growing all the time, despite considerable financial difficulties. The parameters of the debate shift accordingly, but introduce some interesting dilemmas, exemplified in the following question. Is it necessarily the case that the debates of the English-speaking world, dominated for the most part by American sociology, furnish the best resources to understand the

complex evolutions of religion in the post-communist world? An obvious illustration can be found in discussions of religious liberty that derive from the American literature, but resonate in entirely different ways in the Orthodox world. More precisely, American protagonists have difficulty appreciating the presence of an historic religious tradition, be this Orthodox, Catholic or Reformed. Herein lies perhaps an opportunity for the British contribution – one that is conversant with the English-speaking literature, but more aware than many American scholars of the nature and forms of European religious life.

CLOSING THE LOOP

The final section of this chapter brings the argument full circle. It is concerned with the current use of the classics in the sociology of religion and addresses a very specific question: to what extent do the ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel still resonate for sociologists of religion in a world which continues to transform itself – though in different ways in different places? Given the wealth of material available, the following examples are necessarily selective. They have been chosen to illustrate the role of the classics in creative thinking about the place of religion in late as opposed to early modernity.

The writings of Karl Marx present the greatest ambiguity for modern scholars. This, in many respects, was always so, a point underlined by O'Toole: 'A presence in the subdiscipline only since the decline of functionalism and the rise of "conflict sociology" in the discipline as a whole, he [Marx] remains a somewhat marginal figure in the pantheon' (2000: 147). This was even more the case given the Durkheimian assumptions that religion should bind rather than divide; an emphasis on Durkheim – i.e. on the recurrent theme of social order – necessarily diminishes the influence of Marx. The remarks about Central and East Europe at the end of the previous section, and the search for alternative frames of reference from those that dominated prior to 1989 provide a further clue with respect to the present period. The following extract from one of the most distinguished social scientists in modern Europe is, for example, instructive. It refers to the radical change in perspective in East German scholarship following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.

> Marxism is dead. Whereas in the old times when Europe was still divided, no one could obtain a job in an East German University without knowing half of *Das Kapital* by heart, today no one can remain in his job who is not able to prove that he was forced to buy the blue volumes of MEW (Marx-Engels Werke) without actually reading them (Lepenies, 1991).

More worryingly, a new orthodoxy (drawing primarily on Weber instead of Marx) is emerging to replace the old; both are dangerous when taken to extreme. This is not the place to develop in detail the various ideologies that have emerged since the collapse of Marxism as a political system. Nor should it be assumed that the thinking associated with free markets and the 'end of history' will remain dominant indefinitely. All of us need to recall the central insight of Marxist thinking in this respect – i.e. that religion cannot be understood apart from the world of which it is part – even if we reject any kind of mechanical causality. In the meantime, those who went a little too far down the Marxist track (the liberation theologians in Latin America or the purveyors of a Christian-Marxist dialogue in Europe), or whose policies were very much coloured by the cold war perspective and the need to maintain a dialogue with the East (not least the World Council of Churches) have had to rethink their priorities. Both, in their different ways, have been overtaken by events.

Max Weber is, of course, the gainer in these particular exchanges, but quite apart from the see-saw effect, his influence on the sociology of religion was and remains immense. The following are simply two among hundreds of possible examples. Taken together, however, they demonstrate not only the range and scope of Weber's thinking but its continuing capacity to generate new work and new ideas. The first, Stephen Sharot's *A Comparative Sociology of World Religions* (2001), offers a book-length demonstration of Weberian inspiration. The second is taken from a relatively recent essay by David Martin which draws very directly on Weber's classic presentation of 'Politics as a Vocation', but is written with contemporary figures in mind (Martin, 2004).

Sharot articulates the goal of his book as follows: a comparative analysis of 'what are variously called the popular, common, folk, unofficial religious forms, or little traditions, and their relationships with the elite, official forms, or great traditions, of the world religions' (2001: 3). In order to do this Sharot draws on an extensive body of interdisciplinary literature concerned with popular religion and organizes this 'within an analytic scheme of religious action that builds principally on the writings of Max Weber' (2001: 4). The Weberian influence is pervasive: the brilliance of the analysis lies, however, in linking Weber's thinking about religious action with popular rather than elite forms of religious life.

Sharot's book is divided into two parts. The first, the theoretical frame, pays particular attention to the concept of religious action. Employing two intersecting dimensions – one which contrasts the transformative with the thaumaturgical, and one which contrasts

this-worldly action with other-worldly action – Sharot suggests four types of religious goals (2001: 36). These are the nomic (the maintenance of existing order anchored in the supramundane), the transformative (with an emphasis on change in nature, society and individual being), the thaumaturgical (where release rather than change is expected) and the extrinsic (where mundane goals are the object of actions purported to be supramundane). Goals, however, are only one aspect of religious action. We need also to look at means, which, like goals, are infinitely varied in the different world faiths and in different types (elite and popular) of believers. The framework of means as well as goals is used to organize the material on elite and popular religion in the chapters that follow, which cover all the major world faiths.

Martin's work on secularization is similarly inspired by Weber and will be discussed in the following chapter. Here reference is made to a particular essay: one which draws on Weberian thinking to understand more fully the tensions between different professional groups – the politician, the Christian and the academic/journalist. A perceptive reader, acquainted with the British political scene post 9/11, could very easily give names to these protagonists, but the real point lies elsewhere. That is in appreciating the different parameters within which the politician, the Christian and the journalist work and the near impossibility of crossing the associated boundaries. Politicians, for example, must be pragmatic; they must know when and how to compromise and how to effect the 'best possible' within the present situation. The Christian, on the other hand, deals in absolutes (the Sermon on the Mount, the Prince of Peace) – ideas which do not, indeed cannot, translate into political realities, either in secular life or in ecclesiastical policy-making. The latter in many ways can be even more deadly than the former. The journalist, finally, is free in three respects: he or she is *free to* subject both the politician and the Christian to merciless scrutiny, whilst remaining *free from* the obligations of office. The journalist is free, thirdly, to move on to the next debate at will, leaving others to sweep up the broken china. A failure to grasp these essential differences of role leads not only to serious misunderstandings but to policy disasters, a point fully grasped by Max Weber but equally relevant today.

Durkheim was concerned with social as well as individual constraints. Like Weber, his work has been continually influential in the sociology of religion and in many parts of the world. The concept of civil religion, for example, has crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic. Rousseau's original formulation was taken up by Robert Bellah (under the influence of Durkheim and Parsons) in order to understand key aspects of American life, within which certain forms of religion played a crucial part, a

debate with widespread and continuing resonance. The same concept can be deployed to understand aspects of religion in Europe, not least the complexities of the United Kingdom and its constituent nations.[8] More recently the presence of a European civil religion, without which, it could be argued, Europe does not really exist has formed an important element in European debate (Bastian and Collange, 1999; Davie, 2000a). It is this issue, surely, that lies behind the heated discussion concerning references to religion in the Preamble to the European Constitution, a statement that tried, and maybe failed, to capture what it means to be European at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

A striking and even more direct application of Durkheimian ideas to modern sociological thinking about religion can be found in the work of Philip Mellor and Chris Shilling, who (like their role model) are as much social theorists as sociologists of religion. In a series of recent publications, Mellor and Shilling rework the Durkheimian themes in innovative ways. In *Re-forming the Body* (1997) religion becomes central to the theoretical account. Different forms of community (medieval, early modern, baroque and postmodern) are analysed in relation to different forms of embodiment and different religious cultures, in an approach which throws light on modern as well as historical forms of society – in terms not only of human embodiment itself but the manner in which communities are constructed. The argument is developed in *The Sociological Ambition* (2001). In this the recurrent theme concerns the 'elementary forms of social and moral life', meaning the conditions under which individuals acquire a sense of responsibility, obligation or duty towards others, and are able to develop normative ideals, mediated through different types of social order or grouping. More specifically, the manner in which human beings and human societies deal with death is as central to sociological discussion as it is to human living itself.

Working alone, Mellor (2004a, 2004b) has completed the 'trilogy' in a robust defense of the study of society. In many respects this approach counters the more extreme versions of the 'cultural turn', insisting that we pay attention to the continuing importance of society, not least in terms of religion. It is simply not the case that 'real' human beings live in a free-floating global culture driven by information technology. A nice example can be found in post-war patterns of immigration to be discussed in Part II of this book. Significant immigrant populations have arrived in Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century, undoubtedly influenced by economic, technological and cultural factors. They arrive, however, in different European societies in which their experiences will be correspondingly varied – for specific historical reasons. The Muslim headscarf is an acceptable part of public life in Britain, but

not in France. Understanding why requires careful attention to detail of each of the societies in question.

Rather more briefly, the revival of interest in Georg Simmel's contribution in recent decades quite clearly reflects the very evident 'fit' not only between his writing and emergent forms of religious life, but in the debates about modernity itself, bearing in mind that the latter goes well beyond the limits of this chapter. Regarding the former, at least in the West, increasing attention is being paid to the forms of religiousness that exist outside the institutional churches. An obvious example can be found in the tendency to 'believe without belonging' (Davie, 1994). The rapidity with which this phrase was picked up by those working in the field, both scholars and practitioners, remains striking (see pp. 138–40 for a fuller discussion of this point). Clearly it resonates for a wide range of people. The distinction between religion and spirituality offers a similar formulation, an observation that reflects very directly the Simmelian contrast between form and content – an increasingly important distinction in the religious field. Chapters 7 and 8 will explore these ideas in some detail.

The dominant themes of *this* chapter can now be drawn together. They lie in the very varied discourses that have emerged in the sociology of religion in different parts of the world, paying particular attention to the debt that the global community of scholars still owes to the classics. Within these parameters, Europeans (including the founding fathers) remain more concerned than most with religious decline – in other words with the process of secularization. Such preoccupations are hardly surprising given the profiles of religious life in Europe, where no one disputes that the indices of active religiosity (notably regular practice and assent to the historic formulae of the Christian churches) point downwards. It is this situation that provides the starting point for Chapter 3.

NOTES

1 In Europe, Henri Desroche offers an excellent example. Desroche was for many years a Dominican priest. Having left the order, he engaged with Marxism in some depth, though never became a Marxist as such (Cipriani, 1998).

2 The quintessentially French ideology that emerged to fill this gap is known as *laïcité*, a word which is difficult to translate into English. It means the absence of religion in the public sphere – notably the state and the school system. It will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 8.

3 The *General Economic History* in 1927 and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1930.

4 See the special issue of *Social Compass* dedicated to Thomas Luckmann's work (*Social Compass*, 50/3, 2003).

5 Peter Beyer has been of central importance in making Niklaus Luhmann's work known to English-speaking scholars in the sociology of religion (Beyer, 1993).

6 The papers from this conference can be found in Pollack and Olsen (forthcoming).

7 See in particular Manow (2004), a paper also presented in New York.

8 Bocock and Thompson (1985) and Davie (1994) offer several examples of civil religion in Britain, many of which revolve around liminal moments in national life within which royal occasions remain surprisingly prominent.