

# The World Is Not Flat: Theorizing Religion in Comparative and Historical Context

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About 25 years ago, when I was in the process of teaching sociology of religion to myself and to UIC undergraduates but had not yet published much in the field, I was approached by one of our graduate students from China about a possible Master's paper topic on "deviance" (a graduate field we offered at the time). Under that rubric, she wanted to do research on religion. Specifically, she wanted to study what she perceived as the high incidence of Christian identification among her co-ethnics in Chicago (international students and immigrants from China, as well as American-born Chinese). Such persons were quite visible on campus, for instance regularly handing out tracts in the student union. I told her that the empirical topic of her proposed research was excellent but that she would have to subsume it under a different rubric, namely the sociology of religion. Religion, I said, isn't deviant in the United States. She'd need to bone up on a new literature. Discouraged, she went to find another advisor.

I could have done a better job of advising that student and might myself have learned more from her if she'd stayed with me. In fact I now realize that referring her to the literature in sociology of religion was a very mixed blessing, perhaps even a curse. Although the empirical literature was abundant and much of it very competent, much of the theorizing was beside the point. Too often in those days (the 1980s), theorizing in sociology of religion presupposed in effect that religious conviction in the modern world was indeed deviant. People in our society who adhered to religious convictions, especially "traditional" ones, were said to require the shelter of special "plausibility structures" to shield them from the disconfirmation of their convictions that would stare them in the face when and if they opened themselves to the viewpoints of those around them (Berger 1967). Instead of really shedding light on how the religious group under study was organized and what they were doing (I am thinking of ethnographies that I read in those days), too much time was spent on the question, "how can they believe these things?"

Before I began to conduct my own research on American religion, I was inclined to agree with that kind of theorizing (as I testified in Warner 1978, the last major article that I wrote before I turned my full attention to sociology of religion). An undergraduate admirer of the thinking of Peter Berger (1961) and steeped during graduate school in the same European theorists as he was (Warner 1976, Berger, and Luckmann 1966), I too assumed that the Enlightenment was hegemonic over popular thinking.

Following plausibility theory, the proposal I prepared (in 1975) for my first foray into empirical research on evangelical and charismatic religion featured the working hypothesis that supernatural accounts

would be primarily confined to events that would easily escape disconfirmation. Thus, I expected that the things self-styled “new Christians” would pray over with an expectation of positive results would be mostly human dispositions (health and well-being) and not physical events. Once I was in the field and began hearing testimonies of thanksgiving for miraculous meteorological and mechanical interventions (e.g., that the Lord would stop the wind from interfering with an outdoor puppet show or that He would see to it that the ominous sound issuing from the wheel bearings of an old car would not prevent the faithful occupants from completing their hundred-mile drive home), it dawned on me that my hunch about the unique vulnerability of religious ideas might be mistaken. Soon, I found that other researchers looking into unconventional religion in the US had come to similar conclusions (Snow and Machalek 1982). By the time I was ready to present my full-scale report on that research project (Warner 1988), I had re-evaluated my earlier inclination that found plausibility theory itself plausible. I had come to see that not everyone in our society is in thrall to the authority of science. “As an American sociologist, I was part of the least religious stratum in the most religious modern society in the world” (Warner 1988, p. 65).

My encounter with the Chinese student came while, already tenured and in the midst of a busy career, I was slowly pondering the lack of fit between my theoretical capital and the empirical realities I had discovered in the field. Not at all quickly, I settled on a conviction that became foundational to my work. The research literature that I was mastering was overwhelmingly situated in the United States. But the theory by which we were supposed to understand those facts on the ground, theory that I had already been teaching for twenty years, was mostly drawn from the European experience. That conviction informed my eventual formulation of a new, U.S.-centered “paradigm,” in my most widely cited publication (Warner 1993). To put it another way, what we call “religion” works differently in different contexts. Religion was deviant in China but not in the US. Religion is much less widely plausible in today’s Europe than in the US. We will misunderstand “religion” in these contexts if we continue to view it through lenses that were originally prescribed for other contexts.

At that time, my proposal (Warner 1993) was that analyses of religion in the US (which was in fact the site of most of the empirical literature) should recognize that religious institutions in the US had never been embedded within what the reigning theory spoke of as a single societal “sacred canopy.” I insisted that that concept, or what may be translated as a monopoly established religion, applied instead to the historic experience of European societies from the time of Constantine until the Reformation, extending much longer in countries

like Spain, Italy, and Sweden. With the erosion, or collapse, of the sacred canopy, issues of plausibility and the challenge of pluralism confronted the previously protected European religious monopolies. But because religious pluralism was part of the US experience from the outset, because the US had an “open market” for religion, because religious institutions could not count on the support of the state, because in the absence of state funding they had to persuade people to follow them, and because many of them did so with remarkable success, many of the matters (e.g., pluralism, plausibility) that the reigning theory took as problems that had to be addressed were, in the American context, not real problems at all. Instead, the understanding of American religion demanded that analysts explain, for example, why some religious bodies were more successful than others in attracting and maintaining adherents and why adherents of one religious body were, say, more likely to support women’s rights than were others. When, as in Europe, there were many fewer religious options, such questions of variation among them were much less compelling.

Religion works differently in different contexts.

In my view, the decisive contribution of the “new paradigm” statement (Warner 1997) was the insight that the US and Europe had different religious systems and the European legacy of state-guaranteed religious monopoly should not be taken, as it had been by sociological theorists, as a general model for the understanding of religion (Davie 2000). But other scholars heard a different lesson. They (e.g., Stark 1997; Finke and Stark 1992) proposed that the American experience of disestablishment and what they conceived of as an “unregulated,” not just an “open,” religious market should be the basis for theorizing about religion across the board. Not content with merely de-centering the older concept of religious monopoly as the paradigmatic situation of religion, they turned it on its head so that a competitive religious market was the natural state of things, to be understood using general rational-choice presuppositions.

This is not the place to debate the heuristic value of such presuppositions (see, e.g., Lechner 2007). Suffice it to say that in my own view, either set of presuppositions taken as a general model (that monopoly is the paradigmatic state of religion and therefore that religious diversity poses a deep cognitive challenge of plausibility, or that religious competition is the paradigmatic state of religion and therefore that freely choosing agents are the starting point of analysis) is flawed. Either general model would require tortuous Ptolemaic specifications to be rendered applicable to the empirical realities that should always be at the center of our studies.

In the current timely, indeed overdue, attention being paid to the need for sociology of religion to escape its still parochial boundaries (e.g., Levitt et al. 2010; Poulson 2010; Smilde 2010), I fear that there is danger that the nature of those boundaries may be misunderstood and the lessons we can derive from studying them lost. For example, because the American population, the sampling frame from which we derive most of our research literature, remains overwhelmingly Christian in religious affiliation, it is said that the field needs to escape its “Christo-centrism.” Because, as Levitt (2007; see also Hodegenu-Sotelo 2008) put it so unforgettably, “God needs no passport,” it is said that the study of religion must be transnational.

My proposal to achieve real progress is different. It is to identify—specify, analyze and understand—the real boundaries within which religion operates. Despite the excitement over transnational phenomena, I am convinced that many of those boundaries coincide with state borders and that therefore our analyses should be international and comparative more than transnational. With respect to religion (and no doubt other social phenomena) the world is not flat. Although my own focus is on religion in the US, it is my intent not to use that case to generalize about religion but rather to speak about religion in a particular context.

My first step (Warner 2008) was the recognition that the US, the ideal-typical case for religious economies theorizing, does not have a simple unregulated market for religion. The US has had a pro-religious market from the outset. Contemplation of the documents the American “founders” produced (Waldman 2008) demonstrates that. Although the long-term effect of the establishment clause of the first amendment was to prohibit governmental establishment of religion, the short-term effect (and, for some, the intent) was to protect the existing state establishments of religion in New England. More to the point, the remaining provisions of the amendment, including the “free exercise” clause, positively privileged religion (along with the press) as an institution of civil society.

Comparison of the text of the First Amendment with the third article of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, promulgated on opposite sides of the Atlantic within a month of one another, illuminates the American context.

Amendment I. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Article III: The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can any individual or any body of men be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it. (quoted from Warner 1976, p. 26)

Literally nobody and no body in revolutionary France had rights that were not granted by the newly constituted nation of the French. But the rights of two specific institutions of American civil society that preceded the constitution were explicitly conceded.

Early in the experience of the new American republic, religious institutions took advantage of these rights by becoming legal corporations. “The majority of private corporations chartered between 1780 and 1810 were . . . churches, townships, schools, and voluntary organizations” (Kaufman 2008, p. 404; see also Novak 2001). Referencing Tocqueville’s observations about the proliferation of voluntary associations in the early 1830s, Jason Kaufman writes, “Americans’ unusual propensity to ‘associate’ does not appear to be the result of Americans’ ingrained preferences . . . American voluntarism instead appears directly related to state support for private corporations” (Kaufman 2008, p. 421).

But religion was not only privileged in American law. It was, and for the most part remains, respected in public opinion. Although the Constitution itself was a secular document creating a secular government (especially as seen in the Article VI prohibition of religious tests for public office within the new government), George Washington, the first president of the new republic, regularly asserted his theistic convictions in public addresses, offering deference and thanks to an unspecified “Supreme Ruler of Nations,” “Arbiter of the Universe,” “Lord and Ruler of Nations” and “Almighty Being” (Waldman 208, pp. 159–163). None of these utterances was discernibly Christian, let alone Protestant, and Washington’s record of support for the rights of Catholics and Jews is a matter of public record. Washington was a prophet of religious equality, but there is no doubt that he was generically pro-religious.

There have been many constitutional changes in France and legal ones in the US in the intervening two centuries, but one can see in the two constitutional texts and the developments in law and public opinion that followed them an early contrast between the French principle of *laïcité*, codified in the law of 1905, and the eventual American attitude toward religion as expressed in the famous remark of President-elect Eisenhower (1952): “Our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” Edgell and her colleagues (2006) were dismayed to find a half century later that a similar

attitude remained widespread among the American public, for whom “atheists” ranked lower in esteem of all marginalized categories. In France, by contrast, atheism is not stigmatized. The French are socially freer than the Americans to believe or disbelieve any religious dogma. But the French are also constrained to keep their religions to themselves, not to wear them, as it were, on their sleeves.

The friendliness to religion that is so deeply ingrained in American law and culture extends to the religion of immigrants. It is a long-standing observation that immigrants to the US experience affirmation and autonomy particularly in the exercise of their religions. Something of a principle in the sociology of American religion, this generalization was first applied to immigrants from the 1880s to the 1920s (Herberg 1960), and then extended to post-1965 immigrants (Williams 1988, pp. 11–12; Warner 1993, pp. 1060–63). Those who do research especially among Muslim and Hindu immigrants to the US (e.g., Williams 1988) are used to hearing from their informants that they are more religious after migration than before and that they feel particularly free to express their religion in the US. Muslims’ exercise of religious freedom in the US continues to be vigorous even in the face of the very real post-9/11 backlash (Williams 2010). Other immigrants who are not especially religious often feel pressured to commit to a religion in the US context, either to adopt the religion of their new (often co-ethnic) neighbors or to find new value in what had previously been a vestigial home-country-based religious identification (Chen 2008).

Yet it is not the case that immigrants everywhere experience welcome by virtue of their religious profession. Margarita Mooney (2011, also 2009) argues that the concept of “contexts of reception,” developed by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) and their associates to understand the varied experience of immigrants, should be applied cross-nationally. For Mooney, the greater or lesser welcome accorded to religious expression as an attribute of immigrant groups is a key variable across host countries. Based on her study of the experience of Haitian Catholic immigrants in urban sites in three different national contexts, she finds that the efforts of Catholic agencies to assist immigrant incorporation are perceived as more legitimate in Miami, her US site, than in Montreal, the Quebec site, or Paris, the French site. Religious leaders are regarded as legitimate spokespersons for immigrants in Miami in a way that they are not in Montreal or Paris. These church-based actors were far more successful in securing public funds for settlement programs in Miami, and because they had greater credibility with the very pious Haitian immigrant masses they represent than do government workers, their aid efforts were more effective.

As I have argued, the US is a national context friendly to religion, not only as a matter of individual conscience but more importantly of institutional free exercise. By contrast, following the principle of *laïcité*, French citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief, but their expressions of religion are constrained to be private. From that point of view, religious leaders are not legitimate advocates for groups of their followers. Quebec is of course part of Canada and as such historically midway between European and American models in terms of its political system. But Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" of the 1960s led to both greater constitutional autonomy for Quebec than had previously prevailed and a quite radical and sudden secularization, including the adoption of still-contested norms governing the public expression of religion that approximate the French principle of *laïcité*. National contexts differ in their receptiveness to immigrants' religious expression and religious mobilization.

With respect to context of reception for immigrant religion as an international-comparative variable, Mooney (2011) conceptualizes three different "church-state models" on the basis of her three-case study. There is "cooperation," characteristic of the United States; "conflict," characteristic of Quebec; and "invisibility," characteristic of France.

In a more ambitious effort to specify religious context, with the potential of religious violence in mind, Jay Demerath (2007) suggests a fourfold model for different contexts of the public expression of religion. One dimension is the distinction between polities with an official religious identity, which he calls "religious states," and those without them, which are "secular states." The second dimension is the question whether religion has a legitimate role in national electoral politics, which in a very simplified form yields the distinction between "religious politics" and "secular politics." Demerath characterizes Northern Ireland and Brazil as religious states with religious politics, whereas France, Turkey, and China are secular states with secular politics. The more interesting cases for Demerath are the officially religious states with secular politics, of which there are two variants. In the first (e.g., England and Sweden), the official religion is a cover for religious indifference (see, e.g., Zuckerman 2010). In effect, these are stable secular states with secular politics in all but name. In the second (e.g., Pakistan and Indonesia), which Demerath regards as unstable, the acknowledgment of a state religion represents an attempt to control imminent religious disorder. Finally there are secular states with religious politics, a category that includes the US, India, and Japan. With appropriate caution and numerous caveats, Demerath sees this fourth type as potentially most stable, allowing, as it does, religious partisans to



compete for public influence and public office but prohibiting them, when in power, from imposing their sectarian ideals on a pluralistic constituency.

I think we need more work like Demerath's (see also Demerath 2001) to characterize and classify comparative religious contexts. At the same time, we will overlook important distinctions if we move too quickly to conceptual abstraction. For example, I would prefer to say that although France, Turkey, and China are officially secular states, each of them is ruled by a regime that owes its legitimacy to a jealously guarded civil religion. See Yang (2008) for the Chinese case. But let us return to the many ways that religious context can matter.

We have seen that the legitimacy accorded to the public expression of religion is a consequential cross-societal variable, but so is the extent to which religion can express subcultural or subaltern identities. In his empirically grounded exploration of the potential role of religion in opposition to repressive regimes, Dwight Billings (1990) found it necessary to counter the suspicion of that potential contained in the work of Antonio Gramsci, his otherwise insightful theoretical guide. Writing from and about early-20th-century Italy, Gramsci could not imagine the profusion of independent sectarian congregations that is typical across the US. To Gramsci, "religion" meant "the Church." But in the context of southern Appalachia in the 1920s and '30s, it could be, and was, the fact that some churches articulated the grievances of workers against the near complete hegemony of their employers. Small, often independent churches led by self-taught bi-vocational preachers became the venue for sustained, uncompromising labor mobilization in the minefields of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, while denominational churches led by trained clergy whose livelihood was beholden to employers capitulated to company demands in the case of strikes in the North Carolina mills. Equally conservative theologically, the churches in these two different contexts had different implications for articulating the voices of equally exploited workers.

Michael Lindsay (2008) came to similar conclusions in his comparative analysis of religion and collective voice in the US and Britain. The US is famously a more religious society and Britain a more class-conscious society. The reasons have to do with context. "The structure of the religious market in Great Britain has kept peripheral groups from turning to religion for support or encouragement in their resistance to the establishment" (655). In contrast to Britain, "religion provides historically peripheral groups in the United States with their primary source of collective identity" (677).

Because the US has always lacked an established church, because from the 18th century onward, there has been a profusion of what religious establishments are inclined to call “sects,” and because the religious market is remarkably open, nearly any group can express itself through religion. But the US political system is not similarly open to minority group representation. The winner-take-all plurality voting rules typical in the US (the highest vote-getter wins the sole seat) constrains parties to hew to the center in the hope of commanding the largest share of the vote. This constraint represents an almost insuperable barrier against the viability of third parties (Lipset 1963). Thus, the US has hundreds of religious denominations but only two long-standing political parties, whereas the situation is reversed in many European countries, where there are few churches but multiple political parties. Minorities (whether social class or ethnic or other) do not easily gain political representation in the US, but they can quite readily gain religious representation.

No group illustrates this generalization better, or has taken better advantage of the underlying principle, than African Americans (Warner 1993, pp. 1068–1070, Warner 2008, pp. 142–143). The Black church is historically the cultural womb of the African American community (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990) and, a generation after the Civil Rights movement, still served as a template for African American political action (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). These facts are well researched and well understood (Morris 1984; Harris 1999). My point here is that their very possibility depends on the existence of a distinct, independent Black church tradition, and that in turn is a function of the way that religion works in the US.

The consequences of the US religious open market are not, however, necessarily beneficial for minorities, or for anyone else for that matter. It is precisely the freedom of religion making the Black church possible that also makes possible the high degree of religious racial segregation in the US (Emerson and Smith 2000). Unlike the hierarchically specified, geographically defined “parish” system normatively characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church, the more typical American “congregational” pattern allows, even encourages, churchgoers to choose those with whom they will worship (Warner 1994). They do so partly on the basis of “homophily,” or their desire to associate with those they perceive to be like themselves. Given the very high salience accorded to “race” in American culture, and given the plethora of alternatives American churchgoers have (there is roughly one congregation for every one thousand men, women, and children in the US), it is nearly inevitable that the churchgoing population will be sorted on the basis of race, as indeed it is (Emerson and Smith 2000). So both the empowerment of African Americans through their churches and the notorious racial

segregation of religious institutions in general are alike functions of the distinctive and institutionalized American religious market system.

Thus whatever the research topic—the effect of religion on subordinates’ empowerment, on individual health, or on societal violence, of the effect of class stratification or racism on religion—it *is necessary to specify the location of the religion in question*. At a minimum, “location” means the host society. But it is also often necessary to specify the region of the society. For example, the personal consequences of participation in their churches on the part of African Americans depends in part on the religious context, i.e., whether they are located in the rural South, where church adherence is only “semi-voluntary” (Ellison and Sherkat 1995) or in cities or in the North, where participation is more a matter of choice. What it means to be Jewish is one thing in New York and quite another in Arizona. I believe that those of us who study immigration and religion would benefit greatly by a study of religion and region in Mexico. Without giving a great deal of thought to the matter, we tend to treat that sprawling nation as religiously homogeneous.

But “location” may also mean place in historical time. As illustrated above by the case of Quebec, which was a very different religious context in 1970 than it had been in 1960, the temporal context of religious observations matters. When I’m deciding whether to referee a paper on evangelicals and politics in the contemporary US, I want to know whether the data were gathered before 1980, between 1980 and 2006, or within the past five years.

I propose that every paper submitted for publication in sociology of religion specify the where and when in the title, or, at a minimum, in the abstract. I submit that a research report becomes less parochial, not more, when the topic is supplemented with the context. For example, not “religion and socio-economic achievement” (Homola et al. 1987), but “religion and socio-economic achievement: analysis of data from the General Social Survey 1972–1980.” Not “religious attendance and subjective health” (Levin and Markides 1986), but “religious attendance and subjective health among three generations of Mexican Americans in San Antonio, 1981–82.” Not “religious influence on marital stability” (Call and Heaton 1997) but “religious influence on marital stability: a longitudinal study of American couples, 1987–1994.” Speaking for myself, I am more likely to want to read a research report when I understand that the authors care about their provenance of their evidence. But more broadly speaking, my argument is that we do not overcome parochialism by neglecting the fact that religion always comes in contextual packages.

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