

THE EMERGING STRONG PROGRAM IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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Introduction

After a long period of neglect, sociologists have rediscovered the study of religion in recent decades [...] the field has been transformed from a relatively isolated, sometimes stagnant intellectual area to a vibrant, exciting subfield that is open to, and well connected with, other areas of inquiry.

Christopher Ellison and Darren Sherkat, "The Sociology of Religion in the 21st Century: Introduction" (2008)

My own sense is that the sociological study of religion has now entered an ill-defined transition phase in which many scholars are moving beyond some of the field's burning concerns of recent years but have not yet clearly redefined the major issues, challenges and goals for the future.

Christian Smith, "Future Directions in the Sociology of Religion" (2008)

The study of religion is in a state of crisis. Sociology of religion, and other disciplines, have neither anticipated nor plausibly explained the resurgence of religion we have witnessed over the last decades. We work with diverse concepts of religion that are basically incompatible with each other and with theories that at best have exhausted their potential and at worst seem to confirm our preconceptions rather than explain the world in which we live. Therefore, it seems to be an opportune moment to reflect on the presuppositions, concepts, and theories which should inform the study of religion.

Martin Riesebrodt, "Theses on a Theory of Religion" (2008)

The sociology of religion is experiencing a period of renewed vitality yet, at the same time, one of critical paradigmatic reflection. Whether the current situation appears as an opportunity, transition, or crisis depends on your point of view. But it is clear that over the past two decades scholarly, media, and societal interest in religious phenomena has increased at the same time that considerable renewal of the concepts and methods used by the sub-discipline has occurred. This renewal within the sociology of religion was spurred by reframing the debate on secularization, even challenging the concept, as well as a move towards active, agentive concepts of religious practice that could capture the richness and vitality of religious manifestations in the late 20th century.

These trends were codified by Stephen Warner in his 1993 article on the emergence of a "new paradigm" in the study of religion (Warner 1993). Warner argued that in the "old paradigm," based on the European experience of secularization, scholars saw meaning as the main function of religion, and predicted that in modern pluralistic contexts religion would become increasingly abstract and privatistic. In contrast, in the new paradigm scholars saw empowerment as religion's main function, and regarded religious pluralism as the norm. While formerly researchers of religion concentrated on the construction of meaningful universes and the maintenance of the plausibility of deviant beliefs, researchers within the new paradigm paid attention to what religion did for its adherents. Religious participation was seen as a strategy of action. So, for example, women become involved in conservative religion to ensure the commitment of wayward spouses; ethnic minorities see religious participation as a way to preserve ethnic identity and develop self-help networks; and groups on all sides of the political spectrum fight their battles through religion. Middle class white Christians form the core of the Christian conservative movement, but African American churches play a key role in progressive African American activism and

religious congregations currently play a key role in gay communities and their struggles.

The “new paradigm” facilitated and gave focus to a tremendous increase in research over the next decade, which has only continued to increase in the 21st century, although it no longer binds contemporary trends in research. The “rational choice” approach to religion, which forms one main current within, but not coterminous with, the new paradigm, has been increasingly challenged. Rational choice scholars famously turned secularization theory on its head, arguing that religious pluralism facilitates, rather than undermines, religious participation. However, careful reexaminations of the data suggest that there is no clear support for this portrayal (Olsen 1998, 1999; Chaves and Gorski 2001). Others have challenged rational choice theory’s micro-social portrayal of the religious behavior and action of religious leaders and everyday participants, suggesting that the reliance on naked means-ends rationality leads us to miss some important empirical phenomena (Edgell 2006; Smilde 2007; Wilde 2007). Christian Smith has more broadly argued that the focus on how people achieve goals through religion lacks a convincing account of human motivation and therefore cannot explain why religion exists in the first place (Smith 2003).

But if the new paradigm no longer holds together existing research in the sociology of religion, what, if anything, is taking its place? Below we present evidence from our content analysis, spanning thirty years of the sociology of religion, which suggests a broad move towards a “strong program” in the sociology of religion. We seek to examine the contours of this trend as well as what it might mean in the particular context of the sub-discipline.

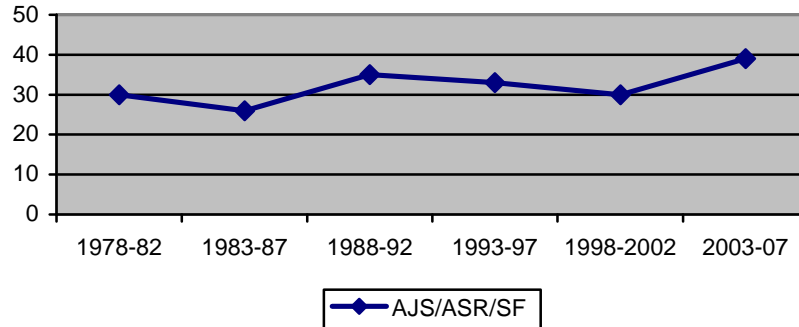
30 Years of the Sociology of Religion

Scholars’ perspectives on where a sub-discipline has been and where it is going are inevitably colored by the particularity of one’s field of research and reading. Colleagues can articulate and support quite different interpretations, reaching agreement with only great difficulty. For this reason we thought it would be most fruitful to analyze the state of the sub-discipline through actual empirical research, rather than either a review article or methodological and philosophical discussion. Original empirical research entails a lot of work, even if it results only in modest substantive points; but it has a unique capacity for moving a debate forward by creating a systematic reference to the empirical world.

We looked at thirty years of journal articles in the sociology of religion, published in three general sociology journals (*American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*) and two sociology of religion journals (*Sociology of Religion* and the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*). We think of academic journal articles as one of several structured public spheres of the sub-discipline. Rather than objective collections of “the best” research determined by timeless scientific criteria, we see the articles published in academic journals as the results of negotiation between authors, referees, and editors, all guided by the dominant perspectives and discourses of their day. Journal articles reflect not only the interests and innovations, but also the prejudices and blinders of their historical context, and this is exactly what we are trying to measure. Indeed, it is precisely because journals tend to be more conservative than books that we see it as a useful indicator of the overall state of the sub-discipline.

Our sample consisted of 587 articles covering the period from 1978 to 2007. We coded these articles for the religious tradition(s) and national context(s), the sources of funding they list, the causal model they used, and their socio-evaluative findings. (A more detailed description of the research project and coding rules can be found in the methodological appendix.)

Figure 1.—Number of articles on religion in the top three sociology journals, 1978/2007:



Note.—Includes articles from *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*. Given the small numbers and the relatively small increase, the trend is not statistically significant. $p = .437$. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

A presupposition underlying this effort is our view of scholarly sub-disciplines such as the sociology of religion as discursive fields in which discourses function not as cultural templates that individuals enact, but as contexts within which individuals make intelligible their actions. We cannot say what is going on in the heads of any of the actors (i.e. the social scientists) being studied. But discursive fields pose certain questions, concerns and expectations which greatly affect the types of issues a scholar focuses on, as well as the types of emotions and evaluations that are deemed reasonable and suitable for publicity. We aim to be able to detect changes in this discursive field over the course of three decades.

Our data seem to support the idea that the sub-discipline is healthy and vibrant. To look at this question we simply counted the number of articles published in the three top sociology journals over the past thirty years. We assume that the publication of an article on religion in these journals means that it is of interest to the larger discipline and not just to sociologists of religion. Thus, fluctuations in the number of articles from a given sub-discipline can suggest a change in interest among sociologists (Ebaugh 2002, 392). Consistent with what some have suggested (Beckford 2000), the data show a slight upward trend, suggesting an increasing interest in religion across the discipline in general. This increase in religion articles is not accounted for by an expanding pie as the overall number of articles in these journals has remained steady, even declining a little bit over the past thirty years (from 794 in the first five-year segment to 714 in the last five-year segment). Putting the trend in terms of the percentage of all articles reviewed, we would see a growth in the percentage of journal articles addressing religious phenomena from 3.7 percent to 5.8 percent over the past thirty years.

The Emerging Strong Program in the Sociology of Religion

The idea of a “strong program” originated with the sociology of science and its central focus is on the cultural construction of social reality rather than the social construction of culture (see for example Bloor 1991 [1976] and Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996). More recently, Jeffrey Alexander has made the idea of a strong program the centerpiece of his call for a “cultural sociology” that treats culture as an autonomous, independent variable, as opposed to the “sociology of culture” (or “weak program”) that treats it as a dependent variable (Alexander 2003). Alexander suggests using the tools of hermeneutics and structuralism to demonstrate the internal coherence and meaning of culture, the fact that it is not infinitely malleable, as well as the way it can have an important impact on non-symbolic social life and structures.

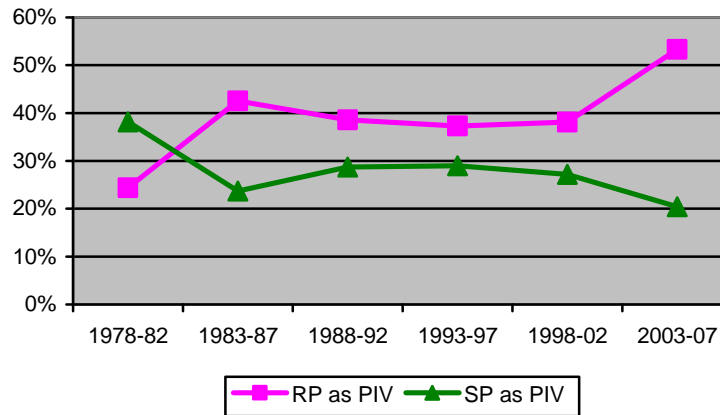
What is the evidence of a strong program emerging in the sociology of religion? We examined this issue by looking at the causal models used in each of the 587 articles we looked at. Excluding theoretical or descriptive articles without causal models, our open coding provided us with fourteen different causal models in the sample. We sorted these models into the mutually exclusive categories of those articles that had religious practices as their *primary* independent variable and those that had social phenomena as their *primary* independent variable. For example, an article that looked at how religious practice affected strategies for confronting retirement would have RP as its primary independent variable. An article looking at how retirement affected religious practice would have SP as its primary independent variable.

The trends visible in Figure 2 are striking. While at the beginning of our sample period it was more common to see a social process as the independent variable, this tendency progressively reversed itself until, in the last period, articles were twice as likely to have religious processes than social processes as their primary independent variable. Indeed, by the last five year period in our study over half of all articles had religious processes as their independent variable. While it seems to have accentuated in the past five years, the trend is clearly evident over a thirty year time span; indeed it has been over two decades since it was more common to have social processes than religious processes as the primary independent variable.

The most basic building block of any strong program is the idea that culture is an autonomous phenomenon that is not reducible to social circumstances. The usual way of arguing for the autonomy of culture is by maintaining that it consists of a system of symbols that are substantially arbitrary. Hence Alexander and Smith: “The arbitrary status of a sign means that its meaning is derived not from its social referent—the signified—but from its relation to other symbols, or signifiers within a discursive code” (2004). This internal determination of meaning is what then gives culture the power to constitute social reality rather than vice versa.

Of course this articulation of the strong program readily grafts onto the sociology of religion: religion becomes an autonomous, irreducible phenomenon that can thus function as an independent variable. Christian Smith, for example, argues for the constitutive and irreducible character of religious belief: “Our believings are what create the conditions and shape of our very perceptions, identity, agency, orientation, purpose—in short, our selves, our lives, and our worlds as we know them” (2003, p.57).

Figure 2.—Articles with religious processes (RP) or social processes (SP) as the primary independent variable (PIV), 1978-2007:



Note.—Includes articles from the entire sample (AJS, ASR, SF, SOR, JSSR). RP as PIV and SP as PIV are mutually exclusive categories. For RP as PIV, $p = .003$. For SP as PIV, $p = .093$. All p -values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p -value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious.

Alexander’s development of a strong program of cultural sociology and Smith’s push for a more robust concept of religious culture are more than just intellectual movements. They are clearly tied into a long line of normative thinking that sees a relatively autonomous cultural realm as a key element of human dignity and freedom. This impulse is most clearly articulated in the work of Immanuel Kant, but from there is dispersed in myriad directions and through multiple disciplines. In sociology it runs through Max Weber’s interest in the role of world religions in economic ethics and Emile Durkheim’s idea of the dualism of human nature; it is articulated clearly also in Talcott Parsons’s voluntaristic theory of action. Donald Levine says this neo-Kantian impulse formed part of the “quest for a secular ethic” in the early history of sociology (Levine 1995).¹

These issues are complex, but for the purposes of this paper we can distinguish between philosophical and sociological versions of normative thinking about cultural autonomy. By the philosophical version we mean the portrait provided by neo-Kantian scholars like Weber, who saw the empirical discovery of irreducible cultural phenomena as a confirmation of human freedom. In this perspective, demonstrating that human beings actively give form to the social world, rather than simply being determined by it, underlines the fact of human freedom. However, this perspective is simply philosophical since human form-giving capacity in the world does not mean humans necessarily act in any objectively moral or desirable way, but only that their actions are not predetermined.

By sociological we mean the portrait provided by neo-Kantian scholars such as Emile Durkheim, who not only saw religious culture as an expression of human form-

¹ However, Smith points out that his project is also compatible with a theistic account of religious origins (2003, 122).

giving capacities, but also thought it was morally and sociologically desirable. He portrays religion and culture more broadly as collective representations and forms of ritual practice that help individuals surpass their egoistic interests in solidarity with the collectivity.

In this paper we will refer to contemporary sociological versions of normative thinking in the study of religion—the idea that religious practice facilitates human well-being—as “pro-religiousness.” This was already one of the central elements of the “new paradigm” described above.² And, as we will see below, it is only strengthened by the growing emphasis on religion as an independent variable.

We call these normative conclusions “socio-evaluative” findings. Here it is important to point out that there is no one-to-one correspondence between positive socio-evaluative findings and a scholar’s religious belief. While positive socio-evaluative findings clearly fit with a classic religious impulse that sees right relationship with the divine to be the key to human flourishing—as Moses put it: “keep his decrees and commands, which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you” (Deuteronomy 4:40; see also the first pages of Max Weber’s *Sociology of Religion*)—positive consequences of religious practice are entirely compatible with its being a fictitious illusion. Indeed, Durkheim provided the classic articulation of pro-religiousness, despite being an atheist himself.

So what is the relationship between the philosophical and the sociological normative projects? We think it safe to say that a concept of cultural autonomy is a necessary but not sufficient condition of pro-religiousness. Having religion as an independent variable would seem to be a logical requirement for any socio-evaluative findings, positive or negative. If you want to argue that religion has a positive or negative impact you must start by portraying it as an autonomous phenomenon that can have causal impact. Indeed, looking at Table 1 we can see that having religion as the primary independent variable makes it more likely for articles to report socio-evaluative findings, whether positive or negative (see Methodological Appendix for coding rules for socio-evaluative findings).

² One important line of research, for example, shows how religious practice has positive impacts on various physical and mental health outcomes (Ellison, et al. 1989; Kass, et al. 1991). Survey research has shown that religious involvement may produce these effects through the discouragement of deviant (Sloane and Potvin 1986; Bainbridge 1989) and risky behavior, including casual sex and consumption of alcohol and tobacco (Dudley, Mutch, and Cruise 1987; Richard, Bell, and Carlson 2000). Religious communities also provide opportunities for social interaction and support, and foster self-esteem, personal efficacy, and effective coping behaviors (see Sherkat and Ellison 1999 for a review). Ethnographic research has focused on the way religious participation helps women (Chong 2008, Davidman 1991, Stacey 1998), racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities (Moon 2004), the poor (Smilde 2007), immigrants (Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz 2000), and even the wealthy and powerful (Lindsay 2007) effectively engage their social context.

Table 1.--Percentage of Socio-evaluative Findings among Articles with Varying Causal Models:

Causal model	Articles	Articles with Any Soc.-eval. Findings	Percentage	P-values ³
Social Process as Primary IV	173	45	26.1%	0.0001
Religious Phenomena as Primary IV	244	146	59.8%	0.0001
Religious Phenomena as Any IV	359	200	55.7%	0.0001

Note.—Sample (N = 613).⁴ Percentage of articles with any socio-evaluative finding in the entire sample is 44.5%. Table reads as follows: e.g., of the 173 articles using a causal model in which a social process was the primary independent variable, 45 (26.1%) provided non-neutral socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

Nevertheless, we can see that this correlation seems to mainly be a product of the relationship between causal direction and *positive* socio-evaluative findings, as the strength of association holds along this axis, while the association between causal model and negative findings is not especially strong. With negative socio-evaluative findings only one type of causal model (religion as any independent variable) reaches an acceptable level of significance. This may indicate that articles with negative socio-evaluative findings tend to take religion not as the only independent variable, but as working in concert with other, non-religious variables.⁵

Together, these trends suggest that the growth of a strong program (in which religious practices are portrayed as autonomous, and can therefore be considered independent variables) is an important part of the move towards more socio-evaluative findings in general and increasingly positive socio-evaluative findings in particular.

³ Here we report the actual p-value, rather than simply whether it is below standard thresholds like .05 or .01. In the end these conventions are arbitrary, and with a small sample size such as this, a p-value that barely misses statistical significance is still informative.

⁴ The total N of our sample varies according to the independent variable being considered (N = 587 when simply looking at articles. N = 588 when looking at national context. N = 613 when looking at religious tradition. See methodological appendix for further explanation.

⁵ So, for example, in our sample Van Poppel, Liefbroer and Schellekens (2003) show that the existence of long-term class stability in the Netherlands was originally determined by religious identity. In this case the socio-evaluative finding on religion is negative, but it is only one of a number of factors involved. Haddad and Khashan (2003) find, in a survey of Muslims, that the age of respondents and the type of Islam that they profess determined whether they approved of the September 11 attacks. Della, Fave, and Hillery (1980) show that, in spite of an egalitarian ideology, there was a clear hierarchy in the Trappist monastery they studied.

Table 2.—Percentage of Positive Socio-evaluative Findings among Articles with Varying Causal Models:

Causal model	Articles	Articles with Positive Social Evaluation	Percentage	P-values
Social Process as Primary IV	173	27	15.6%	.0001
Religious Phenomena as Primary IV	244	113	46.3%	.0001
Religious Phenomena as Any IV	359	150	41.7%	.0001

Note.—Sample (N = 613). The percentage of articles with positive socio-evaluative findings in the entire sample is 32.9%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 173 articles using a causal model in which a social process was the primary independent variable, 27 (15.6%) provided positive socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

Table 3.—Percentage of Negative Socio-evaluative Findings among Articles with Varying Causal Models:

Causal model	Articles	Articles with Neg. Social Evaluation	Percentage	P-values
Social Process as Primary IV	173	19	10.9%	0.2459
Religious Phenomena as Primary IV	244	39	15.9%	0.1505
Religious Phenomena as Any IV	359	60	16.7%	0.0063

Note.—Sample (N = 613). The percentage of articles with negative socio-evaluative findings in the entire sample is 14.6%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 173 articles using a causal model in which a social process was the primary independent variable, 19 (10.9%) contained negative socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

Interrogating the Strong Program

While we think the move towards a more robust concept of religious culture and the increased focus on positive socio-evaluative findings are, on balance, positive developments, we believe that the desirability of a “strong program” as it has been

understood in the sociology of culture is certainly up for debate (indeed, the first author has registered his reservations elsewhere; see Smilde 2007).

First, the emphasis on cultural autonomy has received significant criticism from a number of directions. Feminist scholars have long suggested that an emphasis on the autonomy of culture, abstracted from and somehow prior to the practices of everyday life, rests on masculine social experience (Gilligan 1982, Smith 1990, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Deconstructionist scholars would see the emphasis on an autonomous and foundational cultural order as a manifestation of Western logocentrism (Culler 1982). Post-colonial scholars argue that the attempt to distill out an autonomous cultural or religious meaning system is a uniquely Christian effort, having more to do with the particular institutional history of the West than with any universal aspects of religion (Asad 1993, Chakrabarty 2000). Most recently, scholars of religion have argued that the emphasis on meaning and belief, instead of everyday practices, rituals, and sacred objects and spaces, shows the influence of a Protestant self-understanding on the academic study of religion (Bender 2003, Cadge 2005, Orsi 2006, Carroll 2007).

With these critiques in mind, we are concerned that while a move away from reductionist portrayals of religion towards a thicker concept of culture could enrich our understanding, it could also lead to an ethnocentrism that would hinder it. When the concept of religion as a deeply-held, autonomous set of beliefs becomes the baseline for conceptualizing religion, religious practices that do not fit this model are often portrayed as insincere, vacillating, superficial, or impermanent. Apart from the obvious ethnocentrism involved, this can lead to empirically inaccurate assessments that discount the sociological importance of practices not fitting this model, or which overestimate the power of religious practices that do.

Second, the issue of pro-religiousness also needs to be examined. In our view, the idea that religion, in any given instance, contributes to human well-being is an entirely plausible, unobjectionable, and frequently replicated scientific finding. What is more, in some discursive contexts, it provides a vital contribution. While arguing that religion contributes to human well being arguably reinforces common wisdom in societies like the United States, within the academy it frequently amounts to a surprising and courageous position.⁶ We also think that having religious motivations in sociological research is epistemologically and scientifically unobjectionable. In the classic Weberian formulation, social scientists inevitably research intellectual problems generated by specific value commitments. And value commitments entail a certain image of the way the world works, which social scientific research can corroborate (without being able to prove the ultimate validity of the values).

However, we are concerned that an increasing tendency towards pro-religiousness in the sub-discipline could saturate it with research that fits this project, setting aside research questions that do not. Research that would seek to show, for example, how religious participation might facilitate racism, insensitivity to inequality, militarism, patriarchy, civil privatism, political polarization, or other social ills could be left undone because of a scarcity of funding; or pushed aside if it doesn't fit with the interests of scholarly gatekeepers. Likewise, studies of religion that simply see it as a sociologically important phenomena that is neither universally good nor universally bad, similar to phenomena such as the "state", "gender," or "class," could also have a

⁶The first author of this article once received an invitation with four other faculty members to a university symposium on evolution with the charge "to show that intelligent design is irrational." While the two natural scientists fulfilled the request, the two social scientists spoiled the show by arguing that there was nothing inherently irrational about it.

reduced set of opportunities. Such an imbalance could, in turn, distance the sub-discipline from the concerns and debates of the larger discipline precisely at the time that religion has come to the fore in public consciousness as a central social and political issue.

Having stated our concerns, it only seems fair to forward our own positions on these issues, both of which come from our interpretation of Max Weber. We believe that whether religious culture functions as an autonomous phenomenon with an independent causal impact, or as a dependent phenomenon caused by something else, is an empirical question whose answer will vary by context.⁷ Furthermore, while we acknowledge cases of far-reaching cultural autonomy, we see them as historically and culturally unique and typically confined to people in dominant positions, whether that dominance be determined by gender, class, political power, or status. Most people, at most times and in most places, have cultural beliefs and practices that are closely integrated into the vicissitudes of everyday life which can only be analyzed in terms of “worldviews” or “moral orders” in a forced way.

We see as a separate question whether or not a particular religious practice or phenomenon is seen as “moral,” which will depend in any case on the perspective of the person who is making the judgment. A still separate question is whether a religious practice or phenomena has any positive consequences at the individual or group level. This latter question is further complicated by temporal frame of reference (what is positive in the short term might not be in the long term and vice versa) and social frame of reference (what is good for the individual might be bad for the group; what is good for one group might be bad for another). Thus, our concern with pro-religiousness is not that it is unscientific, nor that morality is unimportant, nor that religion cannot have positive social consequences. It is rather the conflation of autonomy, morality and social consequences—three issues we consider independent—that concerns us. Space does not allow us to do justice to these positions here—we will give them further attention elsewhere. However, we thought it only fair to the reader to layout the perspective from which we are working.

In what follows we are going to pursue these two issues empirically. Examining pro-religiousness is relatively straightforward and we do that first. We look at the data to see if there is evidence of an increasing predominance of positive religious portraits. Pushing into the implications of the issue of cultural autonomy is a little more complex. We look at the issue of thematic concentration in empirical subject matter. We work with the Weberian assumption of value relevance, which suggests that scholars tend to research issues posed by their value commitments. If, as we have suggested, the strong view of religious culture represents an essentialization and universalization of Christian, and more specifically Protestant, religious culture as it is practiced in the advanced industrialized West, then we would expect it to impact the selection of empirical phenomena to study. More concretely, we suspect that there is an elective affinity between the strong program and research on the US, Christianity, and Protestantism. Thus we would expect research working with a notion of cultural autonomy to contribute to the sub-discipline’s existing concentration on the United States, Christianity and more specifically Protestantism. We look at the evidence for thematic concentration as well as a relationship to portraits of religious practice as an independent variable. Then we look at whether thematic concentration is related to pro-religiousness. In the final empirical section, we look at whether research funding has any role in this.

⁷ Put differently, we work with the notion of conjunctural causation, rather than the notion of constant causation with which most sociologists (see Ragin 1987).

Pro-religiousness

Does the evidence support concerns about pro-religiousness crowding out alternative approaches? If we look at Figure 3 we can see some clear trends. In the first twenty-five years of the sample we can see a clear divergence in socio-evaluative findings, with articles containing positive socio-evaluative findings increasing while negative socio-evaluative findings steadily decline until by 1998-2002 they represent less than five percent of all articles on religion.⁸ However, the portrait gets more complex from 2003 to 2007 as there is a clear upward spike in negative portrayals. There is, in effect, a reconvergence in positive and negative socio-evaluative findings, basically due to an increase in the latter. This spike in the data would seemingly support the idea that the beginning of the new millennium saw not only an increase in the public role of religion, but an increasing skepticism and criticism of that role (Demerath 2003, Hodegenu-Sotelo 2008). Hodegenu-Sotelo suggests that this is due not only to the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the September 11, 2001 attacks, but also to the international pedophilia scandal rocking the Catholic Church, as well as the high profile role of Evangelical Christianity in the controversial administration of George W. Bush (2008). Only three of the twenty-six articles reporting negative socio-evaluative findings treated Islam suggesting that this cannot be reduced to an anti-Islamic reaction. Rather, these events seem to have generated a scholarly context in which it became more plausible to write-up and publish negative socio-evaluative findings.

There is a corresponding increase in positive socio-evaluative findings. But this should not be taken as an indication of some sort of polarization or culture war among sociologists of religion. Indeed, the most salient innovation in this last five year period are articles that report both positive and negative socio-evaluative elements in their research. This is more than twice as common as in any previous five year segment.⁹ We regard this as a quite positive development, as it shows that religion-positive and religion-critical findings are not mutually exclusive and that both are increasing in legitimacy.

Thematic Concentration

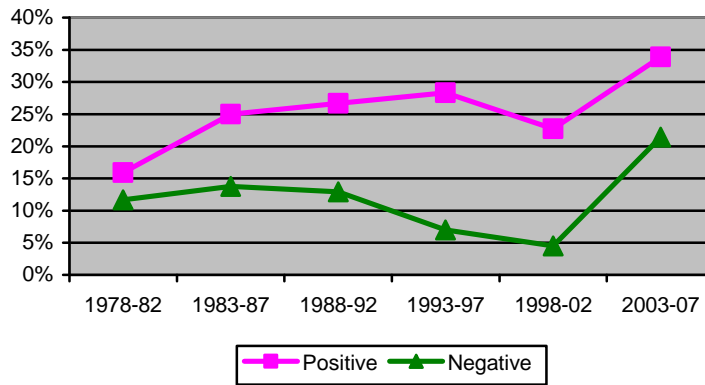
Some of the main external factors that have brought about the growth of the sociological study of religion in recent decades—including the worldwide growth of religious fundamentalism, as well as increased immigration to the US from non-European sources—would lead us to expect a diversification in the subject matter of the sociology of religion. However, as mentioned above, the growth of a strong program and an increase in pro-religiousness could well work in the opposite direction, promoting an increased thematic concentration on the traditional foci of Christianity—

⁸ It is also worth noting that at no time in the period surveyed has there been more negative treatment of religion than positive. However, the trend lines are such that this tendency could well have been the reverse in the period before 1978.

⁹ Lisa Keister, for instance, shows that religion has a significant, yet differential impact in determining wealth accumulation by providing goals, strategies of action, and contacts. While in the case of Jews this facilitates wealth accumulation, in the case of conservative Protestants it diminishes accumulation (2003, p.488). And Mark Regnerus shows that parental religious devotion seems to protect girls from involvement in delinquency yet amplify delinquency among boys (2003, p.493).

especially Protestant Christianity—and the United States. Indeed, looking at Figure 4, the data from our sample reveal no evidence of diversification. If anything, the sub-discipline seems to have experienced a slight accentuation in its traditional foci. By the last five year period in the sample, two thirds of journal articles on religion have the United States as their geographical focus and over forty percent study some form of Christianity. Thus, while Peter Beyer found increasing diversification in his content analysis of SSSR sessions (2000), journal articles reflect no such process.¹⁰

Figure 3.—Articles containing positive or negative socio-evaluative findings, 1978-2007:

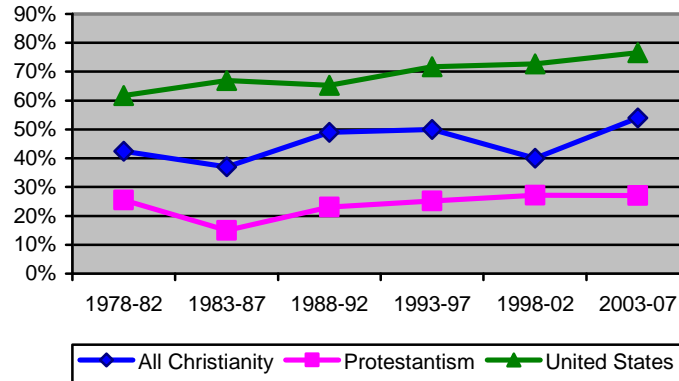


Note.—Includes articles from entire sample. Note that these are not mutually exclusive categories. For positive socio-evaluative findings, $p = .097$. For negative socio-evaluative findings, $p = .004$. All p -values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p -value equal to or less than $.05$ to be statistically significant. A p -value of $.05$ essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. We use Chi-square, which measures the probability of distribution in spaces instead of regression precisely because the linear trend—especially in the case of negative socio-evaluative findings—does not tell the most interesting story. In future work on this project we hope to use time series regression.

How does thematic concentration overlap with the strong program and its concomitant socio-evaluative trends? Looking at Table 4, we can see that articles on the United States are significantly more likely to portray religion as an independent variable than the rest of the sample. (The fact that the percentage of articles on the US receiving funding is not all that much higher than the overall percentage does not diminish the finding. That articles on the US make up almost two thirds of all the articles affects the overall percentage.) Articles on Europe, on the other hand, are significantly less likely to portray religion as an independent variable. Indeed the result for Europe is so strong that even with a relatively small N it is statistically significant.

¹⁰ It should be noted that the only point of comparison here is the sociology of religion with itself over time. We do not have data with which to make comparisons with what has happened in other sub-disciplines.

Figure 4.—Percent of articles whose authors focus on the US, Christianity, and Protestantism:



Note.—Includes articles from entire sample. Note that these are not mutually exclusive categories. For All Christianity, $p = .602$. For Protestant, $p = .393$. For US, $p = .676$. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant.

Table 4.—Percentage of Articles with Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable by Geographical Context:

Geographic Context	Articles	Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable	Percentage	P-Values
US	388	169	43.5%	.002
Adv. Ind.West	452	186	41.1%	.065
Europe	42	7	16.7%	.002
Asia	20	8	40.0%	.934
Middle East	18	7	38.9%	.984
Latin America	21	10	47.6%	.416
LDCs	51	24	47.0%	.224

Note.—Sample N = 588. The percentage of articles with Religious Phenomena as Independent Variable in the entire sample is 39.1%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 388 articles examining a US context, 169 (43.5%) had a religious phenomenon as the primary independent variable. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. The total number of cases depends on the independent variable; see footnote 4.

Looking at Table 5, which arranges the data in various ways according to religious tradition, research on any form of Christianity except Catholicism is significantly more likely than the rest of the sample to have religion as the primary independent variable. New religious movements (NRMs) are the one type of religious tradition in which religion is less likely to be portrayed as an independent variable.

These findings would indeed support our suspicion that the emerging strong program in the sociology of religion is strongly tied to research on the US and on non-Catholic forms of Christianity. Is research on certain empirical topics also more likely to come forth with positive socio-evaluative findings? One would reasonably think that if having religion as the primary independent variable is significantly associated with positive socio-evaluative findings and if religious tradition is positively associated with causal model, then religious tradition should be significantly associated with socio-evaluative findings. However, the data do not provide any clear portrait.

Table 5—Percentage of Articles with Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable by Religious Tradition

Religious Tradition	Articles	Religion as Primary Ind. Var.	Prop.	P-values
Catholic	91	38	41.7%	.6799
Protestant	135	67	49.6%	.0083
All Non Cath Christian	191	90	47.1%	.0128
All Christian	263	118	44.8%	.0264
All Judeo Christian	294	130	44.2%	.0321
Jewish	33	13	39.4%	.9605
NRMs	51	12	23.5%	.0131
“Religion”	218	79	36.2%	.1803
Non-Christian	130	46	35.3%	.2461

Note.—Sample N = 613. The percentage of articles with Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable in the entire sample is 39.8%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 91 articles examining Catholicism, 38 (41.7%) had religion as the primary independent variable. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Religious tradition categories are not mutually exclusive and many articles discuss more than one. “All Christian” is more than Catholic + Protestant because it includes the many articles that simply use the term “Christian.” “All Judeo-Christian” includes articles using the term “Judeo-Christian,” + “All Christian” + “Jewish;” but it is less than the latter two combined because of several articles that include them both “Christian” and “Jewish.” “Religion” refers to articles that do not specify a religious tradition. The total number of cases depends on the independent variable; see footnote 4.

No generalization can be made regarding Christian or non-Christian religious traditions, as no variant reaches statistical significance. Indeed, the findings are so far from statistical significance that it is unlikely that even a much larger sample would establish relationships. The only thematic category of journal articles that is significantly different than the rest of the sample is research on NRMs, which is less likely to contain positive socio-evaluative findings. Studies of Judaism are clearly more likely to include positive socio-evaluative findings, but the finding is not statistically significant because of the small size of the sample.

Table 6.—Percentage of Articles with Positive Socio-evaluative Findings by Religious Tradition:

Religious Tradition	Articles	Positive Socio-Evaluative Finding	Percentage	P values
Protestant	135	31	23.0%	.3236
Catholic	91	27	29.7%	.4237
All Non-Catholic Christian	191	47	24.6%	.5306
All Christian	263	69	26.2%	.9889
All Judeo-Christian	294	80	27.2%	.6092
Jewish	33	13	39.4%	.0781
NRMs	51	6	11.8%	.0140
Non-Christian	130	30	23.1%	.3522
“Religion”	218	62	28.4%	.3631

Note.—Sample (N = 613) The percentage of articles containing positive socio-evaluative findings in the entire sample is 26.3%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 161 articles examining Protestantism, 31 (23.0%) contained positive socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Religious tradition categories are not mutually exclusive and many articles discuss more than one. “All Christian” is more than Catholic + Protestant because it includes the many articles that simply use the term “Christian.” “All Judeo-Christian” includes articles using the term “Judeo-Christian,” + “All Christian” + “Jewish.” But it is less than the latter two combined because of several articles that include them both “Christian” and “Jewish.” “Religion” refers to articles that do not specify a religious tradition. The total number of cases depends on the independent variable; see footnote 4.

Table 7 does provide some significant, but unexpected, results. We can see from Table 7 that articles on the US and advanced industrialized Western countries are somewhat less likely to contain positive socio-evaluative findings. How can this be explained? We suspect that future analysis will show that researchers working on

various forms of religion in the United States and/or Christianity are guided as much by what Dobbelaere (2000) calls “religious sociology” as any program of pro-religiousness. While they tend to treat the religious practices they study as independent variables, they are not necessarily focused on whether or not it has positive socio-evaluative effects.

Table 7.—Percentage of Articles with Positive Socio-evaluative Finding by Geographical Context:

Geographic Context	Articles	Pos. Socio-Evaluative Finding	Percentage	P values
US	388	95	24.5%	.4268
Adv. Ind. West	452	107	23.7%	.0624
Europe	42	7	16.7%	.172
Asia	20	5	25.0%	.958
Middle East	18	6	33.4%	.439
Latin America	21	14	66.7%	.0001
LDCs	40	21	52.5%	.0021

Note.—Sample (N = 588). The percentage of articles with positive socio-evaluative findings in entire sample is 25.5%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 95 articles examining the US context, 95 (24.5%) contained positive socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Religious tradition categories are not mutually exclusive and many articles discuss more than one. The total number of cases depends on the independent variable; see footnote 4.

Studies of Latin America and less developed countries (LDCs) show a significant tendency towards much higher levels of positive socio-evaluative findings. This finding, along with the tendency to portray religious phenomena, in the case of Latin America and LDCs, as independent variables may suggest that sociologists who study Latin America or LDCs seem to share the romantic¹¹ sentiments of anthropologists insofar as they portray the religion of peoples outside of the industrialized West in favorable terms.¹²

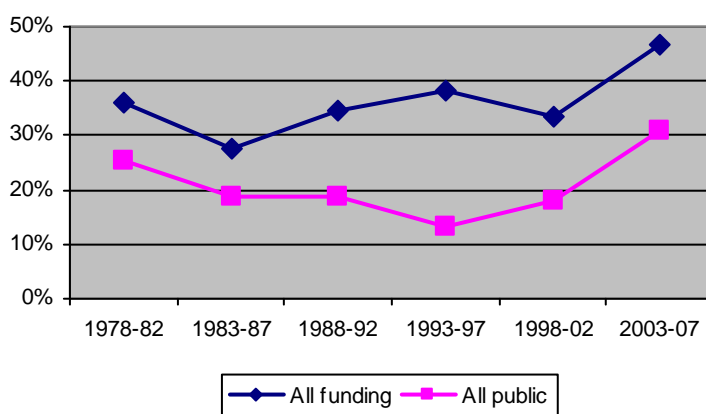
¹¹ We use the term “romantic” not in the colloquial sense of being fuzzy-headed and unrealistic but, rather, in the classic sense of Herder and Boas, who admired the uniqueness and creativity of cultural “others” (Stocking 1989).

¹² In the case of Latin American Protestantism, all of the articles in the sample contain positive socio-evaluative findings (see, for example, Smith 1994 and Smilde 2005), and most of the articles on Catholic base communities are similarly positive (see, for example, Adriance 1985 and Hewitt 1987 and 1992, 273). More broadly, in the case of LDCs there are numerous studies of religion and gender reporting positive socio-evaluative findings (see, for example, Takyi and Addai 2002, 483 and Davis and Robinson 2006, 548).

The Role of Funding

Another indicator of vitality in the sub discipline is the growing amount of research that receives funding. We should point out that we do not believe funding is the sine qua non of good research. Many good research projects do not need funding, and funding certainly does not guarantee the success of a research project. What funding does indicate, however, is the increasing perception among public and private institutions that research on religion is worth spending money on. The figures below show an overall upward trend, albeit with quite dramatic variation. The percentage of articles acknowledging funding for their research has steadily increased over our sample period. Indeed, by the last five year period almost half of the research published in these five journals listed funding.¹³

**Figure 5.—Percentage of articles that name funding by type—
all and public, 1978-2007:**



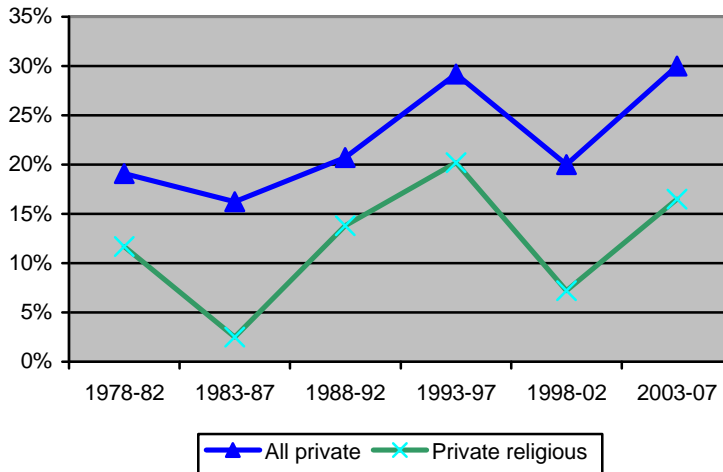
Note.—For all funding, $p = .155$. For public funding, $p = .032$. All p -values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p -value equal to or less than $.05$ to be statistically significant. A p -value of $.05$ essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious.

Some statements regarding the vitality of the sociology of religion have emphasized the support of private foundations in recent years (Smith 2008, Ellison and Sherkat 2008). Likewise, Figure 6 shows evidence of an increase—albeit with wide fluctuations. Thus we would like to examine our data further to think about how funding initiatives by private foundations such as the Pew Charitable Trusts, Lilly Endowment, Inc., the John Templeton Foundation, and the Metanexus Institute might be impacting the rise of the strong program and pro-religiousness in the sociology of

¹³ One potential issue in interpreting this data regards whether we are actually measuring an increase in funding or the progressive entrenchment of norms of acknowledging funding. Preliminary interviews with sociologists who published in the 1970s and earlier suggest that this is not the case. Acknowledging funding was already a professional norm and has not changed over time (Thanks to John Evans and Bob Wuthnow for discussing this issue with us.)

religion. To differing degrees these organizations seem to focus their support on research showing the positive personal and social effects of religious belief and practice, most specifically of Christianity.

**Figure 6.—Percentage of articles that name funding by type—
all private, private religious, 1978-2007:**



Note.—For all private funding, $p = .115$. For private religious funding, $p = .139$. All p -values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p -value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant.

In 2004-05, for example, the Metanexus Institute ran a well-funded competition on “spiritual capital,” taking off from the progressive extension of the notion “capital” from economics to sociology through concepts such as “human capital” and “social capital.” The base notion of capital is one of resources that facilitate goal oriented action. The research they support shows religion to be an independent, autonomous force in the world that needs to be taken into account rather than explained away. Among the topics suggested by the Spiritual Capital Research Program is “the role of religious meaning systems in creating trust and binding norms” as well as the question “might spiritual capital be the missing leg in the stool of economic development, which already includes social and human capital?” Another initiative from the Templeton Advanced Research Program had two awards of \$1 million each to “scientifically [explore] how religion and spirituality contribute to the virtues and human strengths that reflect humanity’s highest aspirations and noble qualities” as well as several awards for projects “that approach religion and spirituality as an important creative or causal factor in the formation of society.” Templeton-Metanexus says it evaluates proposals based on criteria including a “Pioneering Religious Perspective” which refers to the question “Does the project seek to advance religious and spiritual understanding rather than dismiss or reduce the role of religion and spirituality?”

The Lilly Foundation provides a somewhat different rationale with a more moderate portrait of its efforts, claiming that its “religion grantmaking has been focused on major, interlocking efforts aimed at enhancing and sustaining the quality of ministry in American congregations and parishes.” With respect to social scientific

investigation in particular, they say “major research projects support these efforts and provide a solid portrait of 21st century American society and church life. This base of information enables pastors and religious leaders to make informed decisions about their ministries and allows the broader public to understand more deeply the role of religion in American life” (www.lillyendowment.org 2008).

Thus the statements provided by Templeton and Metanexus would seem destined to contribute to the consolidation of a strong program in the sociology of religion, as well as to a focus on socio-evaluative findings. However, the statements provided by the Lilly Foundation are, in theory, equally compatible with neutral or critical findings.

Can the data tell us anything regarding the role of funding in the trends described in previous sections? First we can ask whether funding is related to the emergence of a strong program. Put differently, is funded research more or less likely to portray religion as an independent variable? Table 8 suggests that neither funding in general nor broken down by type seems to have any significant relationship to the rise of a strong program. Research that is funded by religious foundations does seem to be more likely than other research to treat religion as an independent variable. However, only a much larger sample size would tell us if the relationship is statistically significant or spurious.

Table 8.—Percentage of Articles with Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable by Funding Type:

Funding	Articles	Religious Phenomenon as Primary Independent Variable	Percentage	P values
Any	214	84	39.2%	.9790
Public	123	48	39.0%	.4660
Private	134	54	40.2%	.7632
All Religious	72	29	40.2%	.8389
Religious Foundation	41	19	46.3%	.3302

Note.—Sample N = 587. The percentage of articles with Religious Phenomena as Primary Independent Variable in the entire sample is 39.2%. The table reads as follows: e.g., of the 214 articles listing any kind of funding, 84 (39.2%) had a religious phenomenon as the primary independent variable. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

We can go further to ask if funding is highly correlated with positive socio-evaluative findings. That might suggest that funding from private religious organizations is an important motor for pro-religiousness. Looking at the data, we can see that all types of funding seem to be positively related to positive socio-evaluative

findings. And when all funding is considered together there is a highly significant statistical relationship between funded research on religion and research that presents positive findings on religion. When disaggregated by type of funding, however, the results are surprising. Private funding is significantly related to positive socio-evaluative findings, as is funding in general. However, the strongest relationship by far is with *public* funding.

This relationship probably has to do with the support coming from federal institutes specializing in health issues—such as the National Institute for Health, the National Institute for Mental Health, and the National Institution for Child Health and Development—funding research on health that includes religion; however, it cannot be reduced to that. Twenty-six of the fifty-one articles mention financial support from public state universities. In either case, this clear and robust finding complicates frequent suggestions that government institutions and bureaucrats are the main motors of secularization (for a sociological version of this argument see Hechter 2004). Here it would seem that public sector institutions and administrators are quite receptive to scientific research showing a positive role for religion in society. As Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2007) has argued in her research, it is increasingly the case that “we are all religious” in the eyes of the US Federal Government.

Table 9.—Percentage of Articles with Positive Socio-evaluative Findings by Funding Type:

Funding	Cases	Pos. Socio-Ev.	Percentage	P-values
Any	214	75	35.0%	.0001
Public	123	51	41.4%	.0001
Private	134	43	32.0%	.0483
All Religious	72	19	26.3%	.8623
Religious Foundation	41	12	29.3%	.5718

Note.—Sample N = 587. The percentage of articles containing positive socio-evaluative findings in the entire sample is 25.6%. Table reads as follows: e.g., of the 214 articles listing any kind of funding, 75 (35.0%) contained positive socio-evaluative findings. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test.

Religious funding is not significantly related with positive socio-evaluative findings. Here again, these preliminary findings suggest that there is no perceptible association between funding from religious sources and socio-evaluative findings. It could be that much public and private religious funding goes to research of the type that examines, for instance, what social factors facilitate the inter-generational transmission of religion, which we did not code as socio-evaluative. Furthermore some religious researchers funded by religious organizations often focus on the negative

consequences of the practice of specific types of religion—perhaps as part of a confessional search for proper religious practices. These types of findings are not hard to understand given the Lilly Foundation’s interest in the overall health of churches. To such a perspective negative findings are as important as positive findings.¹⁴

Table 10.—Articles Receiving Funding by Geographical Context:

Geographic Context	Articles	Funding	Percentage	P-values
US	388	158	40.7%	.002
Adv. Ind. West	452	180	39.8%	.002
Europe	42	13	31.0%	.447
Asia	22	4	18.2%	.121
Middle East	18	10	55.6%	.086
Latin America	21	7	33.3%	.767
LDCs	51	17	33.3%	.635

Note.—Sample N = 588. The percentage of articles with funding in the entire sample is 36.4%. Table reads as follows: e.g., of the 388 articles examining a US context 158 (40.7%) listed funding. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. The categories of geographical context are not mutually exclusive. “Advanced industrialized West” includes North America, Europe and Australia. “Less developed countries” (LDCs) includes all Latin American, African, Middle Eastern and Asian countries except for Israel and Japan.

Does funding have a role in thematic concentration? At first glance, funding should diversify research geographically. One major impediment to doing research abroad is that it requires funding, compared to fieldwork in a local community that can feasibly be carried out without it. However, the overall trends described above do not reveal such a dynamic. At the same time that funding has increased, thematic concentration has not changed. Looking specifically at funding and geographical region, we can see that articles on the United States and/or the advanced industrialized West are significantly more likely than the rest of the sample to list funding received. If this serves as an indicator of a difference in rates of *proposed* research, it could help explain continued thematic concentration in actual *published* research. Our assumption here is that research that gets funding is more likely to get done. Research that does not get funding oftentimes gets set aside. When it does, it is

¹⁴ For example, Armitage and Dugan, in a study funded by the Lilly Endowment, show that while Protestant Evangelical groups do good work with at-risk urban youths, they promote traditional gender roles in such a way that fosters feelings of oppression among young women (2006, p.554). Darnell and Sherkat, in research funded by the Louisville Institute, find that fundamentalist beliefs and conservative Protestant affiliation both have substantial negative influences on educational attainment (1997).

relatively less likely to obtain the quality of data and analysis requisite for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

Table 11 breaks down the sample using various forms of religious tradition. Articles on any form of Christianity are more likely to receive funding, but none of them quite reach statistical significance. When lumped together into the category “Judeo-Christian” (along with articles that use the term “Judeo-Christian”), they do reach statistical significance. Research on Catholicism is above average in reflecting funding, almost reaching statistical significance. This is likely due to the large number of Catholic research universities that provide internal grants for research. Research on NRMs is significantly less likely to reflect funding. Thus, while Table 10 suggests that funding might be involved in the geographic concentration of the sociology of religion, Table 11 does not show significant evidence that funding is involved in thematic concentration on various forms of Christianity. Nevertheless, small relationships are evident and may, with more data, be determined statistically significant.

Table 11.—Articles Receiving Funding by Religious Tradition:

Religious Tradition	Articles	Funding	Percentage	P values
Protestant	135	58	42.9%	.0876
Catholic	91	41	45.0%	.073
All Non Cath Christian	191	77	40.3%	.212
All Christian	263	106	40.3%	.109
Non-Christian	130	42	32.3%	.241
Jewish	33	16	48.4%	.149
All Judeo-Christian	294	120	40.8%	.043
NRMs	51	11	21.5%	.019
“Religion”	218	78	35.7%	.724

Note.—Sample N = 613. The percentage of articles with funding in the entire sample is 36.7%. Table reads as follows: e.g., of the 135 articles on Protestantism 58 (42.9%) listed funding. Social scientists generally consider any finding with a p-value equal to or less than .05 to be statistically significant. A p-value of .05 essentially says there is a one in twenty chance that the finding is spurious. All p-values are calculated using a two-tailed Chi-square test. Religious tradition categories are not mutually exclusive and many articles discuss more than one. “All Christian” is more than Catholic + Protestant because it includes the many articles that simply use the term “Christian.” “All Judeo-Christian” includes articles using the term “Judeo-Christian,” + “All Christian” + “Jewish.” But it is less than the latter two combined because of several articles that include them both “Christian” and “Jewish.” “Religion” refers to articles that do not specify a religious tradition. The total number of cases depends on the independent variable; see footnote 4.

Summary of Findings

This is intended to be a preliminary report on a research project still in progress. We are currently collecting more data to increase our sample size, in order to determine whether some of the relationships that currently do not reach statistical significance turn out to be spurious or significant. By way of conclusion, we would like to summarize the principal findings of the paper.

The Vitality of the Sociology of Religion

- The number of articles on religion published in the three most important general sociological journals has shown a modest increase over the past thirty years, perhaps revealing increased interest in religion within the discipline more broadly.

The Emerging Strong Program

- There is clear evidence of a strong program emerging in the sociology of religion over the past thirty years. While at the beginning of our sample it was more common for social processes to be the primary independent variables than religious processes, that tendency was progressively inverted over our thirty year period. Indeed, by the last five year period of our sample more than half of the articles had religion as an independent variable, over twice as many as had social processes as their major independent variables.
- The emergence of this strong program is significantly related to the growth in the number of articles with socio-evaluative findings overall, and with the growth of positive socio-evaluative findings in particular.
- From the beginning of the sample through the penultimate five-year period under study (1998-2002), there is a clear bifurcation in socio-evaluative trends with a clear upward trend in positive socio-evaluative findings and a clear downward trend in negative socio-evaluative findings. Indeed, by the period 1998-2002 less than five percent of journal articles on religion reported any negative socio-evaluative findings. In the last five year period, however, the trend towards bifurcation changes as negative socio-evaluative findings trend dramatically upwards. This seems to indicate a new social context in which the publication of negative socio-evaluative findings is a reasonable and acceptable professional undertaking.

Thematic Concentration

- Despite the growing importance of globalization, immigration, the growth of non-Christian religions in Western countries, and the considerable spread of Christianity in the global South, there is no evidence of any diversification of the traditional subject matter of the sociology of religion: the United States, Christianity and, more specifically, Protestantism. If there is any trend at all, it is towards a slight accentuation of thematic concentration. By the end of the sample, three quarters of all articles looked at religion in the United States and over half at Christianity.
- Research on the United States is significantly more likely to portray religion as an independent variable.
- Research on all forms of non-Catholic Christianity is significantly more likely to portray religion as an independent variable. New religious movements are significantly less likely to be portrayed as independent variables.
- However, neither research on Christianity nor on the US is more likely to report positive socio-evaluative findings. The only significant finding with respect to religious tradition is that articles on new religious movements are significantly less likely to report positive socio-evaluative findings. Geographic context does seem to have an impact on positive socio-evaluative findings but in a somewhat unexpected way: articles on Latin America and less developed countries in general are significantly more likely to include positive socio-evaluative findings than other research.

The Role of Funding

- Funding of all types has increased for research on religion. Private funding, however, and especially funding from religious organizations has increased dramatically.
- Funding, however you cut it, is not related to whether religion is portrayed as an independent variable.
- Funding overall is related to positive socio-evaluative findings. Surprisingly, though, this is mainly an effect of public funding, which has by far the strongest and most significant relationship. Private funding is positively related, but at levels that are only barely significant. Only further research will help us understand the nature of this relationship; but, at minimum, the highly significant relationship between public funding and positive socio-evaluative

findings regarding religion complicates common wisdom regarding a presumed antipathy of government bureaucracies and officials to the role of religion in society.

- The absence of a relationship between religious funding and socio-evaluative findings is notable. It suggests that rather than supporting pro-religiousness, it seems to focus its support on classic “religious sociology,” in which religious scholars use sociology to engage religion, warts and all, in order to improve religious institutions and practices.
- Funding clearly seems to be part of the story regarding geographic concentration. Funding is significantly more likely to be in evidence in articles on the US and advanced industrialized countries. It is also more likely to be mentioned in research on Judeo-Christian religions. It is least likely to impact research on new religious movements and non-Christian religions.

Methodological Appendix

Population:	30 years of sociology of religion articles.
Sample:	All issues (from 1978-2007) of <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> , <i>American Sociological Review</i> , <i>Social Forces</i> ; one issue per year of <i>Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion</i> , <i>Sociology of Religion</i> .
	N = 587
Variables:	Religious tradition National context Funding Causal direction Socio-evaluative stance

We chose to look at articles in peer review journals for several reasons. First, peer review journals work well to provide a coherent sample from which to draw inferences insofar as they provide a consistency of publication over time that is not true of, for example, books from university presses. Second, electronic distribution facilitates access. Third, they are normally thought to receive more consistent double-blind review than books. Thus, the scholarship they contain is a clearer indicator of the standards of the field at any given moment. This makes them tend to be more conservative with respect to new approaches and paradigms, and thereby gives us greater assurance that the trends we perceive are not spurious.

We chose the top two national journals in sociology (*American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review*) and the top regional journal (*Social Forces*). This latter is also distinguished by a long-term interest in the sociology of religion. In these journals we chose articles that mentioned religion in the abstract. Our criteria produced a sample of 587 articles which were organized and analyzed using a software package for qualitative data analysis named Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti allowed us to carry-out open coding on the five predetermined variables. After coding was completed it also allowed us to easily combine and aggregate code values.

Some of the articles in our sample address more than one religious tradition and more than one geographic context, and thus often have different socio-evaluative findings according to the variety of their subjects, creating a lot of “noise” in the analysis. For example, an article that found Catholicism to foster community activism in Brazil but lessen it in Canada would inaccurately result in both Brazil and Canada being coded for both positive and negative findings. To confront this problem we divided some articles into more than one case when the causal model or socio-evaluative findings differed based on geographical location or religious tradition. Thus when looking simply at the number of articles in the entire sample, N = 587; when national context becomes the criteria for determining what a case is, N = 588; and when religious tradition determines what counts as a case, N = 613.

Coding rules

Religious Tradition: Articles that focused on a specific religion (i.e. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) were coded as such. If an article focused on more than one religion, these articles were given multiple values. Slightly more than one third of the articles in this analysis did not focus on a specific religious tradition. These articles were coded as “Religion.”

National Context: We coded each article according to the author(s) region of interest. Some articles focused on specific countries such as the United States, Japan, or Israel. Other articles focused on large regions such as Europe, the Middle East, or the “Capitalist West.” In instances where the author(s) focused on more than a single country, but not any identifiable geographic area, these articles were coded as “Multi.” Additionally, some author(s) specified no specific area of interest; these articles were coded “none.” Not surprisingly, the vast majority of articles with a specific regional focus (nearly sixty-five percent) examine religion in the United States.

Funding: We coded for funding based on the author(s) acknowledgment of support from an institution or set of institutions. A large majority of the articles did not acknowledge any source of funding. We distinguished between private and public. We also specified whether private funding was from religious or non-religious sources. Within religious sources we also specified religious foundations. We decided on how to code foundations by consulting their web pages to see whether or not they described their purpose in religious terms. This led us, for example, to code the Pew Foundation as simply a private foundation, while the Lilly Foundation we coded as religious. A different methodology—such as looking at different foundations’ charters—could well have led to a different result.

Causal direction: We tried to code each article in all of its causal complexity, breaking down variables into “religious phenomena” and “social phenomena” and portraying their possible combinations. Not all sociological scholarship analyzes in causal terms, and in those cases where causal analysis was absent we did not impose causal logic on it. A little over 10 percent of the articles did not use causal logic. By the end we had distilled fourteen causal models used in our sample. For the purpose of analysis we divided these models into two exclusive categories (religious process as *primary* independent variable and social process as *primary* independent variable) and two non-exclusive categories (religious process as *any* independent variable and social process as *any* independent variable). In none of our analyses were there any significant differences in using these different constructions so we used the first throughout the paper except where indicated otherwise.

Socio-evaluative Conclusions: We coded an article as having a positive socio-evaluation if its findings clearly showed religion to contribute to human agency or autonomy in general or to concrete outcomes generally considered positive at the micro level (such as physical or mental health, life satisfaction, educational attainment, low deviance rates, participation in civil society, low divorce rates) and at the macro level (such as economic growth or democratic consolidation). We had a separate code for analyses that “debunked the negative” by contradicting a negative stereotype of religious practice. So, for example, an article might show that members of Baptist churches are no less likely to value science than the larger population. For the analysis we grouped these together with positive socio-evaluative findings. We coded an article as having a negative socio-evaluation if its findings clearly showed religious practice to diminish

human agency or autonomy in general, or to have concrete outcomes generally considered negative at the micro-level (such as stress, hysteria, maladjustment, passivity, volatility, low educational or career attainment) or at a relatively more macro level (racism, tolerance and bigotry, gender inequality, poverty and authoritarianism). We had a separate code called “debunking the positive” for articles that contradicted widely held positive socio-evaluative findings. So, for example, an article might show that, despite common sociological wisdom, Catholic practice does not reduce levels of suicide. We combined this with negative findings for some of our analysis. Articles that provided both positive and negative socio-evaluative findings were coded as such. In other words, articles could have more than one value of this variable.

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