Religious Toleration and Organisational Typologies

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ABSTRACT In Britain at least, secularisation has proceeded to the point where the characteristics that conventionally divide churches, denominations, sects, and cults as types of religious organisation have largely disappeared. Drawing on survey data and newspaper reports collected over the last three decades, we argue that societal hostility now focuses so narrowly on tangential aspects of religion that the characteristic of existing in a high degree of tension with the wider environment (which is central to most definitions of the sect) is increasingly rare and is now likely to be applied to churches and denominations. The article concludes with a suggestion for a new typology.

Introduction

This article is intended to draw attention to a major consequence of secularisation for our thinking about religious organisations. The distinction between churches, denominations, sects, and cults is one of the oldest topics in the sociology of religion and typically occupies a key place in textbooks. We suggest that, in Britain at least, secularisation has proceeded to the point where a central distinction between churches and denominations on the one hand and sects and cults on the other—hostile societal reaction—has largely disappeared. Societal hostility now focuses so narrowly on tangential aspects of religion that the characteristic of existing in a high degree of tension with the wider environment (which, in some formulation or other, is central to most conceptualisations of the sect) is increasingly rare and, when it is found, it is as likely to be applied to aspects of types of religion that we conventionally think of as churches and denominations. Therefore, it is worth considering alternative bases for classification—for example one that depends not on external perceptions, but on what the group expects of the world and the individual adherent.

The Impact of Secularisation in Britain

Over the last 200 years, the religious life of Britain has changed in ways that defy any characterisation other than that of secularisation. In 1851, between 40 and 60% of the population attended church (Bruce, Choice 65–9). In 1979, it was around 12%; in 1989, 10%; in 1999, under 8% (Brierley, Tide). In the 1980s, the Church of England lost a quarter of its attenders; the Methodists almost half. Catholic church attendance remained high longer (largely because it was topped up with migrants from more religious Ireland), but in the 1980s and 1990s
declined rapidly towards the British norm (Hornsby-Smith). For Scotland, at-least-once-a-month church attendance fell from 34% in 1972 to 24% in 2001.

Church membership has followed a slightly different trajectory, but the end point is the same. In 1900, when half the population regularly attended church, about 27% were members. This fell to 10% in 2000, but the relationship between attendance and membership switched. In 1900, not all who went were members. In 2000, not all members went.

The gross figures hide a further symptom of secularisation: an ageing constituency. Congregations are growing increasingly elderly as young people abandon Christianity (Tilley; Voas and Crockett). In the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, the most popular religious identity claimed by those under 35 was ‘none’.

The number of people willing to describe themselves in surveys as atheists or agnostics is rising steadily. In 1965, only 2.9% answered ‘atheist, agnostic or no religion’, when asked ‘What is your religion?’ (Foster 159). In 2000, 18% chose ‘a convinced atheist’ or ‘an agnostic person’ in preference to ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ (Opinion Research Business). In the 2001 Scottish survey, we asked respondents if they would describe themselves as religious, spiritual or neither; 46% choose ‘neither’.

One way in which the British churches dominated the culture and society was through education. Even after state primary schooling became universal, the habit of non-church going parents to send their children to Sunday schools spread basic knowledge of the Christian faith beyond the church members. In 1900, half of Britain’s children attended Sunday school; in 1998, the figure was 4% (Brierley, Trends table 2.15).

Full-time clergy may be paid either from public taxation or from the donations of the congregants. In the first case, their number is a good indicator of the social power of religion; in the second case, a good sign of its popularity. In 1900, there were about 45,400 clergy in the UK. In 2000, there were some 34,160, a fall of 25% over a century when the population nearly doubled. Had the Christian churches been relatively as powerful or as popular at the end of the century as at the start, there would have been 80,000 clerics.

While the proportion of people coming to church to be married, baptised, and buried remains higher than the number of members or regular attenders, the trends are moving in the same direction. At the start of the twentieth century, more than 80% of marriages in England and Wales were solemnised in church; at the end of the century, the figure was less than 40% (Bruce, Choice 70–1). In the mid-1930s, the Church of England baptised more than three quarters of infants; the proportion is now below one fifth (Voas).

The above data would permit the possibility that it is faith in religious institutions rather than faith per se that has declined: the case made by Grace Davie with her depiction of Britons as ‘believing without belonging’. However, there is plenty of evidence that Christian beliefs are declining behind, but in step with, institutional decline. In the 1950s, 43% of the population said they believed in a personal God. In the 1990s, it was 31%. In a May 2000 survey, it was 26% (Opinion Research Business). The 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey showed a population fairly evenly divided between ‘There is a personal creator God’ (25%), ‘There is some sort of spirit or life-force’ (28%), and ‘There is something there’ (24%), with the rest asserting agnostic or atheistic positions. In an extensive
review of a half-century of Scottish survey data, Field comes to the same conclusion as Gill, Hadaway and Marler in their review of almost 100 British surveys carried out between 1939 and 1996: “These surveys show a significant erosion of belief in God… the most serious decline occurred in specifically Christian beliefs including belief in a personal God and belief in Jesus as the Son of God as well as traditional Christian teaching about the afterlife and the Bible” (514). In a comprehensive test of the relationship between measures of religious belief, identification, and involvement using longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey, Voas and Crockett conclude that

the slope of the belief lines (showing the pace of generational change) is just as great as for affiliation and substantially higher than for attendance… Far from being relatively strong and robust, religious belief is by this measure lower than passive belonging and is declining more rapidly (in absolute terms) than active belonging. (15–16)

Christian belief, practice, and identification remain widespread and our argument does not depend on any particular theory of secularisation. The point is simply that Christianity, which dominated British life for at least ten centuries, is in serious decline.

British Attitudes to Religion

What then is the current dominant British attitude to religion? We will draw on a wide variety of survey materials, case studies, and detailed tracking of mass media reporting of religion to suggest the following general characterisation.

Sympathy for Religion

There is broad sympathy for religion as a source of moral teaching. In contrast to the polarisation found in the US, the public position of organised religion in the UK is not generally contentious (although some points of friction will be noted below). Organised religion enjoys a position of social honour far greater than its current popularity would merit. It is routine for broadcasters and journalists to seek the views of church spokesmen on news stories that involve ‘moral’ issues; recent examples are cloning, abortion, and euthanasia. Clerics are allowed privileged access to the airwaves with regular worship slots on radio.

The services and vocabulary of conventional religion are commonly invoked in response to death and disaster. Although most Europeans have little interest in creeds or liturgies, they take a benign view of church as a “public utility” (Davie, Europe), especially suitable for solemn observances.

The government imposes on television broadcast licence holders an obligation to produce religious programmes. Apart from news and pre-election party political broadcasts, this is the only kind of programming which is thus supported. In 2000, the Independent Television Commission (the principal regulatory body) organised a major survey of public opinion on this requirement. This was done not because atheists and agnostics objected, but because broadcasters found the requirement onerous, as the audience for such programmes is very small. The conclusions of the survey show very clearly the ambivalence of the British towards religion. Bruce participated as an expert
witness in one focus group in Glasgow. Of the 13 randomly selected individuals in the group, all were in favour of keeping the requirement and three wished the amount of broadcast time to be increased; they felt that religion was important as a source of moral values and that religious programmes were useful for spreading multi-cultural awareness. Yet none of them watched religious programmes and none could accurately name any. The 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey showed considerable support for religious programming. One question explained the legal obligation and asked if respondents thought it should be maintained or phased out. Just over half the respondents did not mind either way, 40% were in favour of the requirement continuing, and only 6% were against. Yet lack of interest in actually watching what they wanted broadcasters to be forced to produce is equally clear from large-scale surveys. In 1968, 40% of viewers said they deliberately turned on to watch such programmes and over half said they paid attention when a religious programme came on. In 1987, only 7% said they deliberately turned on for religious programmes (Gunter and Viney 53).

As a further test of public sympathy for religion, the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked if people were in favour of daily prayers in state schools. In an interesting and ironic contrast with the United States, almost half of Scots (48%) were in favour; 40% were against. Subtracting the number of regular churchgoers, this leaves about 35% of Scots wanting school children to engage in an act of collective worship every day, when they themselves will not do it once a month.

The implicit social functionalism found in attitudes to religion on television and prayer in schools can also be seen in attitudes to faith-based schools. Catholic and Anglican schools are popular, even with non-Christians, because they are thought to produce good results. (To what extent these results depend on selection or on conservative attitudes to discipline and work or on other factors is an interesting question.) However, there are two exceptions that link to our next point. Emmanuel College, Gateshead (one of Britain’s very few independent evangelical schools), has attracted a great deal of hostile criticism because of the creation science beliefs of some of its staff. There has also been much opposition to the ideas of extending state support of religious schools to those run by Muslims and Sikhs.

Fear of Extremism

We can be more specific about the kind of religion for which the British have considerable sympathy (and in which they have little interest), if we add that there is widespread fear and suspicion of what is now frequently called ‘fundamentalism’, by which lay people seem to mean any religion taken too seriously. There are three analytically separable (but in reality often mixed) issues here: dislike for specific values and beliefs, suspicion of high levels of commitment, and a strong commitment to the notion that religion should be confined to the private sphere.

The case of creation science has already been mentioned. Other religious (or religiously legitimated) beliefs and practices which provoke hostility include ritual slaughter of animals, female circumcision, differentiated gender roles, a refusal to ordain women, a reluctance to ordain homosexuals, and support for
unpopular foreign policies (a major concern with regard to Islamic groups). It is worth noting that none of the items on this list concern core religious differentiae. Or to put it another way, while their adherents may see all of these beliefs or practices as central to their faith, outsiders will, not always unreasonably, treat them as optional extras. Hence critics see themselves as objecting not to evangelical Protestantism or to Islam as such, but to harmful social accretions. Were it the case that the British showed themselves otherwise to be committed Christians, one might view the attack on ritual slaughter of animals, for example, as a stratagem to criticise another religion while appearing to be religiously tolerant. However, given the overwhelming evidence for theological indifference, we can take such objections at face value.

There is nothing new in attacking peripheral aspects of religion. In the seventeenth century, “‘Religious’ prints mostly dealt not with the spiritual side of religion but with its political and social aspects—the connections of Catholics with absolutism, the greed and idleness of the Anglican clergy and so on” (Miller 14). As Miller argues, however, this focus resulted from the difficulty of presenting “such absolute concepts as predestination in pictorial form” and because satirists regarded some aspects of religion as too sacred for caricature (15). Our case is that the current concentration on peripherals has its roots in ignorance of, and indifference to, central religious ideas.

As was very common in the 1970s when New Religious Movements (NRMs) such as the Moonies and Hare Krishna were at their height, much hostility to religion is directed at what are taken to be unacceptable levels of commitment. People who give all their money to a religious cause or who reject family members for impurity or who throw up a career are regarded as extremists. A related concern is that such marks of excessive piety have been produced by improper means: that groups and individuals who can evoke considerable sacrifices may be guilty of ‘brainwashing’ or similar influence. Although accusations of brainwashing have never been as popular in the UK as in the US, there is a general suspicion that abnormal behaviour has been produced by abnormal means.

We have no statistical evidence for this change, but what strikes us from 30 years of following newspaper reporting of religion is that increasing secularity has been accompanied by a broadening of targets (so that orthodox Christians may now be regarded in much the same way as converts to NRMs) and a shrinking of what counts as appropriate commitment (so that what in the 1950s could have been regarded as a mark of admirable piety is now seen as dangerous extremism). A Scottish Sunday paper began its account of a man who had been asked to leave his Free Presbyterian congregation, after his adultery became known, as follows: “A religious hardliner has been thrown out of his church after a secret affair” (Sunday Mail 23 February 2003). The church is made to look doubly bad, firstly for nurturing hypocritical hardliners and then for being reactionary and un-Christian in its response to personal misconduct.

Coverage of the Alpha course in basic Christian beliefs provides similar examples. Although originally developed by English charismatic evangelicals, Alpha has been used as a training programme by a wide variety of British Christians (including Presbyterians and Roman Catholics). Despite teaching nothing that is not in the creedal statements of the Christian churches, Alpha often attracts a negative press. For example, Scotland on Sunday (20 September 1998)
ran the headline “‘Danger’ Cult Sparks Mental Health Alert” over a story that said: “A Christian movement about to launch a massive recruiting drive in Scotland has been accused of carrying out ‘dangerous and disturbing’ practices by church leaders and psychiatrists.” The distancing effect of the quotation marks around ‘danger’ is quite undermined by the full text, which uncritically repeats hysterical accusations. When pop star Geri Halliwell expressed an interest in Alpha, a Scottish Sunday paper used this headline for the story: “Outrage over Geri’s Links to Anti-Abortion, Anti-Gay Group” and began with the following statement: “Pop star Geri Halliwell has come under fire from all sides after publicly declaring that she is following a course of study with a controversial Christian fundamentalist group” (Sunday Herald 2 December 2001). Even a serious paper such as the Sunday Times (5 December 1999) can refer to charismatics as ‘happy-clappy’, as though this was a neutral descriptive label.

A third source of hostility is the intrusion of religion into the public sphere. Or to put it in historical terms, as the proportion of the population that has an active faith has declined, the notion that religion should be a private matter for the individual and the family, very largely confined to the home and to the world of leisure, has become ever more firmly entrenched and only religion of the vaguest and most inoffensive kind is permitted in the public sphere. As the Scottish Social Attitudes data show (Bruce and Glendinning), the general recognition that in some vague sense religion is a good thing makes us quite accepting of religious leaders speaking out on ethical topics, provided they are matters on which the major religions share similar positions (and indeed share them with non-religious people) and provided churches are not seen as demanding special privileges. It is fine for Catholic cardinals to pronounce on world poverty because the Catholic Church’s views on poverty are not especially Catholic, indeed not especially religious. However, the Catholic Church promoting its deviant position on contraception attracts hostility. In the Scottish survey, 76% of those who did not attend church regularly thought it was ‘right for religious leaders to speak out on’ world poverty, 61% thought so for the ‘environment’, but only 30% thought it was acceptable on matters of sexual behaviour. Confining the reach of religion to the abstract and inoffensive creates major problems for relations with faith communities (such as those of South Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims and Sikhs) that expect religion to shape most aspects of human life.

The privileged access to the broadcast media mentioned above is governed both by formal rules and by a well understood convention that religious spokesmen should not be controversial and should not proselytise. BBC Radio 4’s prestigious Thought for the Day slot, for example, does not permit speakers to criticise other religions. Preachers for broadcast church services are expected to submit their texts in advance and are warned not to be controversial (a requirement that even Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster accepts). Regulatory bodies police the conventions. The Radio Authority, for example, has frequently warned Premier Christian Radio (the UK’s only terrestrial religious radio station) that it may lose its licence, because its speakers make offensive comments about other religions, and this protection has been extended to Satanism and paganism (Nicholl). As it makes the point about general indifference, we might add that complaints about Premier Radio have
come not from members of the public at large, but from a tiny group of pagans who have taken it on themselves to monitor its broadcasts.

Outside the narrow ranks of the committed Christians there seems widespread hostility to the intrusion into the public sphere of religious distinctiveness. This is very obviously the case when religion is associated with foreign policy differences or with such ‘un-British’ attitudes as declaring that an author who makes fun of a religion should be sentenced to death, as happened with the 1989 fatwa against the author Salman Rushdie that followed the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Ruthven). Yet even lesser assertions of distinctiveness are likely to draw a response which, if not actually hostile, is full of exasperation. One elderly lady expressed what we suspect is a common sentiment when, in response to a news report of a Muslim girl’s refusal to wear a school uniform skirt, she said: “Why do they have to go on about religion all the time? Why can’t they just get on with life here, if here is where they want to be?”

Religion that reinforces cultural and ethnic divisions is generally regarded as bad. However, to repeat the point made earlier, we now see such criticism being extended from alien and minority religions to mainstream denominations and even the wish of a religious minority to preserve its own children in the faith is treated as suspect. The Exclusive Brethren’s practice of the injunction to ‘Be ye not yoked with unbelievers’ into a prohibition against eating with non-Brethren has always been seen as extreme. There has recently been a clear shift in opinion against separate Catholic schools in Scotland. When the dual system was created in 1918, there was some vocal minority Protestant reaction, but most Scots accepted it and the matter was very rarely raised until the 1980s when surveys started to show that even Catholics were not strongly in favour of segregated education. The 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey shows that 59% of Catholics are opposed to the present system. In an attempt to rationalise educational provision, a number of Scottish local authorities have created (or considered) ‘two school’ establishments, where a Catholic and state school share common buildings, but have separate staff with their own hierarchies and slightly different curricula. The Catholic Church in Scotland initially opposed such developments and then bargained hard over details of layout and administration; for example, it insisted on separate entrances and staff rooms. The Scottish media were uniformly unsympathetic to the Church in these arguments, on the grounds that the separation of pupils for some classes was enough to meet the reasonable demand for the opportunity to present a distinctive Catholic ethos. Anything else was merely the Church trying to safeguard its status and preserve its numbers. Having won some arguments and discerned the lack of sympathy for others, the Church hierarchy withdrew its legal attempts to prevent the innovations (*Scotsman* 20 November 2004).

This is an important observation that can be extended with two cases. In 2001, the Free Presbyterian Church attracted hostile press attention for refusing to baptise the children of a regular member who was a member of the Scottish Parliament and who, in his official capacity, had opened the National Mod (for example, *Daily Record* 30 November 2001). This annual festival of Gaelic music and culture is disliked by the Free Presbyterians, not just for its singing and dancing, but also for associations with liberal alcohol consumption. Implicit in the press stories is the clear principle that ‘real’ Christianity should be inclusive and that religious organisations which seek to maintain a distinctive ‘witness’
and hence confine their offices to those who meet their standards are being mean-spirited. What seems clear in these arguments is that even basic organisational self-preservation (such as cathedrals charging tourists for entry) is seen as inappropriately narrow and un-Christian.

Widespread Tolerance

We have argued that even fairly ordinary religious behaviour is now often depicted as peculiar and potentially threatening. Ironically, these attitudes coexist with remarkable tolerance for forms of religion that would 50 years ago have been regarded as dangerously deviant. Tolerance can, of course, be more rhetorical than real (Beaman; Beyer). Almost every state in the world subscribes to some version of the principle of individual religious liberty, but many (including most Islamic countries) constrain minority religions. Even fairly secular Western European states occasionally revert to a nineteenth-century model of listing acceptable religious alternatives to the dominant or national religion and stigmatising those not so listed. In the 1990s, the Belgian government established an official Information and Advice Centre on Harmful Sectarian Organisations (and managed to include a number of long-established and utterly harmless Protestant denominations in its list). In 2001, the French National Assembly passed a law that allowed the state to suppress harmful ‘cults’ (Bruce, Politics 196–200). Many of the new democracies of the former Communist world have required that the religions they will tolerate be in some way officially registered. Although the UK still has two state churches, the state has not followed the European listing model, but has evolved an indifference to religion every bit as open as the position the US achieved through constitutionally guaranteed rights (Bruce and Wright).

Always remembering the exceptions listed above, what is striking about British public opinion is the range of religions that is now actually rather than rhetorically tolerated. A broad range of ‘New Age’ spirituality ideas and therapies is regularly represented in the media as a normal part of contemporary culture. In 2002 when the press began to take an interest in Carole Chaplin, a woman employed by the Prime Minister’s wife Cherie Blair as a style consultant, there were some stories poking mild fun at what one commentator called “the New Age crankiness of the Prime Minister and his wife” (Cohen), but the descriptions of Ayurvedic medicine, Feng Shui and the like were generally straight-faced.

Even unwatered-down forms of Eastern religion are presented as legitimate alternatives to Christianity. Scottish papers, for example, regularly report approvingly of the activities of the Tibetan Buddhist Samye Ling order, which has a monastery in the Borders and in the late 1990s bought Holy Isle, off Arran, and undertook extensive fund-raising to build a religious retreat there. In 2003, the Herald published a feature on the appeal of Buddhism entitled: “Is This the Answer to Your Prayers?” (14 March 2003). The Craven Herald (a weekly paper in the north-west of England) inadvertently made the point with two stories on facing pages (29 April 2005). One side showed a local couple greeting Dadi Janki, one of the leaders of the Brahma Kumaris, and reproduced their praises for this new religious movement. The opposite page had a photograph of the women of the Hellifield Women’s Institute in Morris dancing outfit with a brief story
describing the dance troupe’s birthday celebrations. An exotic form of quasi-Hindu spirituality and English folk dancing were thus presented as equally respectable and conventional leisure activities worthy of support by a local paper.

Even paganism is accepted. In 2001, the Glasgow Herald (which in the 1950s had been the voice of Glasgow’s solidly Presbyterian bourgeoisie) reported that Kevin Carylon, a witch from Hastings, Sussex, cast a spell at the edge of Loch Ness to protect the Loch Ness monster from the potentially harmful searches of scientists (Herald 25 April 2001). The text was only very mildly mocking and was accompanied by a large and flattering photograph of the robed Mr Carylon. Two years later, the Aberdeen Press and Journal (traditionally a bastion of Scottish small-town and small-minded Presbyterianism) featured Carylon, this time casting a spell to raise Nessie, who he was now convinced was a ghost. This report (14 June 2003), again with a large photograph, was utterly straight-faced, as was the Herald version, which confined its humour to the pun in the headline: “Witch Way to a Legend.” A further illustration of the acceptance of paganism was given in the section of the Herald that presents profiles of interesting shops. In March 2004, it featured a witch’s emporium in Fife that stocks “everything a good witch needs from cauldrons and crystals” to “herbal remedies . . . and some goddess statuettes”.

More serious was the story carried by most papers of the naval NCO who had established the right to have his paganism officially recognised by the Navy as a valid religion. The Sunday Telegraph (23 October 2004) could not resist the obvious pun in its headline “The Devil and the Deep-blue Sea”, but otherwise described the officer’s beliefs and the procedures he had followed to become the first registered Satanist in the British armed forces without any hint of condemnation or mockery.

The unease that many Europeans feel about Islam may suggest that religious toleration is incomplete. However, what has happened is that the faith has come to be associated in the popular imagination with extremism and thus seems threatening rather than harmlessly exotic. Most white Britons have no interest in, but likewise no animosity towards, Hinduism or Sikhism. To stereotype Muslims as violent fanatics is obviously a form of intolerance, but the perceived threat is political rather than religious.

Provided a religion is held and practised in private, is entirely voluntary, and is not socially disruptive or divisive, it will be accepted. Although the situation is complicated by the perceived contradiction between religious commitment and modern secular sensibilities (Beckford), the freedom to be peculiar in private generally trumps the distaste for religious constraints.

A Tale of Two Beckers

Much of our thinking about religious organisations comes from Max Weber, through the work of Ernst Troeltsch which is ably summarised by Benton Johnson (540):

Troeltsch’s formulation . . . conceived of church and sect as independent sociological expressions of two variant interpretations of Christian tradition.

The sect, interpreting the traditions of Jesus in a literal and radical manner,
is a small, voluntary fellowship of converts who seek to realise the divine law in their own behaviour. It is a community apart from and in opposition to the world around it. It emphasises the eschatological features of Christian doctrine, espouses ideals of frugality and poverty, prohibits participation in legal or political affairs, and shuns any exercise of dominion over others. Religious equality of believers is stressed and a sharp distinction between clergy and laity is not drawn. It appeals primarily to the lower classes. The church on the other hand stresses the redemptive and forgiving aspects of Christian tradition. It compromises the more radical teachings of Jesus and accepts many features of the secular world as being at least relatively good. It seeks to dominate all elements within the society, to teach and guide them, and to dispense saving grace to them by means of sacraments administered by ecclesiastical office-holders. Although it contains organised expressions of the spirit of Christianity in its monastic system, it does not require its members to realise the divine law in their own behaviour. It is conservative and allied with the upper classes.

In the 1930s, Howard Becker (not the labelling theorist) added the concepts of ‘denomination’ and ‘cult’. Denominations were sects in an advanced stage of development and adjustment to each other and to the secular world which had experienced a decline in religious fervour of the second and third generation of members. He used the term ‘cult’ in place of Troeltsch’s ‘mysticism’ to describe religion of a strictly private, personal character. Its structure was loose. Its goals were those of purely personal ecstatic experience, salvation, comfort, and mental and physical healing. Instead of joining a cult, an activity that implies the consent of others, one simply chooses to believe particular theories or follow certain practices; the consent of other members of the cult is not necessary (H. Becker).

As Roland Robertson and Roy Wallis (“Cult”) among others point out, these distinctions were perfectly sensible, but there are not clear and finite criteria to differentiate the four types: the differences between them are presented in a discursive and ad hoc fashion. Secondly, the distinctions are still being drawn largely on the basis of Christian religious doctrine, which limits the value of the typology for extending sociological thought to non-Christian religious organisations and to non-religious ideological organisations such as political parties. This point is important because sociologists of religious organisation can clearly benefit from work such as Robert Michels’s Political Parties; his iron law of oligarchy is a useful complement to H. R. Niebuhr’s explanation of the decline of sect radicalism. Also, as Roger O’Toole showed with his study of two small left-wing groups, sociological studies of sects can illuminate political movements.

Robertson argues that any typology should “concentrate upon socio-relational aspects of the problem and not upon doctrinal ones” (122). He stresses two issues: (a) the bases for legitimation as conceived by the effective leaders of the organisation and (b) the membership principle: is it inclusive or exclusive? While providing economy and clarity, this model has the drawback that the four types created by its two axes (institutionalised sect, sect, denomination, and church) leave no space for the cultic type of religion which, most scholars agree, is becoming increasingly prevalent.

Wallis accepts entirely Robertson’s claim about the centrality of bases of legitimation, but feels that making inclusive versus exclusive membership a constitutive principle is unnecessary. In his view, the nature of membership is a
contingent feature that can be explained by the interaction between the religion’s claim to legitimation and societal reaction. Where a movement makes high claims (for example, to sole possession of the truth) that the wider public is unwilling to accept, membership is voluntary, rigorously tested, and probably unpopular. Although failure to grow can be given a positive spin as proof of the purity of the movement and the sinfulness of the world, exclusivity of membership (and the resultant smallness), although a common feature of sects, is not generally something that is initially desired. The many Presbyterian groups that broke away from the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth century did not wish to remain small and isolated. They wanted to take the entire church and country with them. It was only the combination of unrealistic demands for personal piety and social hostility that confined them to the status of a saved remnant.

In Wallis’s model (Figure 1), church and sect share the feature of believing that it and only it has the saving truth. What distinguishes them is size and success. In most pre-industrial Christian countries, the Church had a monopoly. The Exclusive Brethren is a very small sect that is widely regarded as deviant. What denomination (for example, the Methodists) and cult have in common (on Wallis’s account) is that they claim only to express the truth, not to be in unique possession of it. What separates them is the other axis: the extent to which they have succeeded in establishing themselves. The Methodists are a respectable part of our social and cultural landscape; most cults are not. As the preceding discussion has shown, this distinction now seems much less clear than it seemed 30 years ago.

Most conceptualisations of religious types have in some form or another stressed the importance of conflict. Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge describe sects and cults as “two kinds of religious movement in a high state of tension with their surrounding environment” (24). The main source of tension has been a point of debate. Johnson offers a brief summary of the Troeltschian approach in these terms: “A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the environment in which it exists.” (542). Here the onus is very firmly on the religion. Stark and others, for example, have highlighted the way that strict sects set out to produce tension with society.

Wallis’s approach is interestingly different in that it stresses societal reaction. The difference may be explained by the rise in popularity of the labelling approach to deviance. Like most sociologists of his generation, Wallis was influenced by Howard S. Becker’s well-known typology of actual and perceived deviance. Although the point now seems obvious, Becker’s separation of whether
an act was deviant from whether it was seen as deviant was radical and influential in the 1960s.

Becker himself leaned towards seeing the societal labelling as more important in the creation of deviance as a social phenomenon than the nature of the original act (or primary deviation). Although Wallis later constructed a model of new religious movements that divided them according to their orientation to the world (analogous to Becker’s primary deviation), he was part of a generation of scholars that was often placed in a position of defending NRMs against false accusations made against them and was well aware that societal reaction may have no reasonable connection with any actual characteristics of a new religious movement (as, for example, when the sexual puritanism of the Moonies was mistaken for promiscuity).

The classic four-fold categorisation and its various mutations have proved of immense value in the sociology of religion. As well as stimulating attempts to explain the relationship between the various characteristics identified, such typologies have provided an economic language for describing vital changes. For example, we can describe much of what has happened to organised religion since the seventeenth century as a dual process of ‘denominalisation’, with both the church form and the sect form converging on the denomination. We can describe the rise of ‘New Age’ forms of spirituality as an increase in the popularity of the cultic form of religion. Yet it may well be that secularisation has an ironic relationship with these distinctions, ably described by them up to a point and then eroding their utility.

To return to our main theme, these typologies reflect the view that hostile societal reaction (or its absence) is a major feature of the environment affecting religious organisations. In that sense they assume societies in which there is some considerable degree of commitment to a dominant religious tradition and hence some degree of stigma attached to religious deviation. Where these are absent, tension produced by and within the group rather than externally in reaction to it may again be the key feature.

The Problem of Sacrifice

The increased tolerance of religious deviance described above is not surprising. People who have little interest in or knowledge of religion will hardly want to criticise others for their heresies and, even if so minded, will be in no position to do so. Previous hostility to specific religions, of course, attended to behavioural
oddities and marks of excessive commitment, but it also centred on core religious differences. Victorian anti-Catholicism accused priests of sexual licentiousness and the laity of national treachery, but it rooted those critiques very firmly in issues of doctrine. The popularity of ex-priests performing the mass for the ridicule of Protestant audiences shows the centrality of the (however much caricatured) religious differences. Now we criticise religions solely on the basis of real or implied secondary characteristics. If our general characterisation of current British attitudes to religion is reasonable, it raises some fascinating issues both for the realities expressed in the conventional church-sect-denomination-cult typology and for the value of such typologies.

Let us consider the reality first. The effect of secularisation can be seen if we consider sacrifice. Sacrifice is largely a matter of interaction. Giving up some valued good (such as drinking alcohol) is an act of primary deviation that is sacrificial because the new recruit previously valued it. However, it gains a great deal of its meaning from the stigma attached to defying the cultural consensus. As we have become increasingly culturally tolerant and diverse, such primary deviation has increasingly gone unnoticed and unremarked. For example, dietary oddities are now so common that religiously inspired ones do not mark out the sectarian. Furthermore, in a religious culture, religious deviants are liable to be punished for their deviation. When Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth century tried to enforce religious conformity, some of the discriminatory legislation passed was intended to restrict opportunities for sectarian promotion, but much of it was simple punishment. In a world where most people have no interest in religion, the individuals and agencies that make up the wider social environment are not going to do the sectarians’ work for them by imposing sacrificial costs.

The absence of a hostile response not only reduces the sectarian’s opportunity to make sacrificial commitment (and thus inadvertently reduces group cohesion). It also makes socialisation more difficult. The general decline of religious knowledge is the obvious problem. Courses such as the Alpha programme have to be mounted to teach members of Christian groups what much of the general population a century ago would have known. Yet there is a more subtle difficulty. In a religious culture, deviation attracts a critical response that forces the deviants to defend their beliefs and thus deepens their knowledge of them. The Victorian anti-Catholic controversy ensured that those on both sides of the argument knew what it was they believed. A generally secular climate provides no such stimulus to sectarian self-knowledge. The groups themselves may inculcate a sense of difference or opposition to the world, but self-defined identity is less effective when it is not reinforced externally.

Alternatives

Typologies are neither true nor false; they are only more or less useful. The classic church-sect-denomination-cult divisions (with their various qualifications) proved extremely useful for identifying the salient features of various forms of the religious life from the Reformation to the end of the twentieth century. That the social reality encapsulated in one of Wallis’s two defining axes—the self-image of the organisation as uniquely legitimate or otherwise was well on
the wane by the middle of the nineteenth century—did not end the usefulness of the typology because, although few religious organisations continued to claim unique propriety into the age of liberal democracy, there were still some that did and the typology offered a simple way of describing the vital change from church and sect to denomination. Our main point in this paper is that the degree of indifference to religion that we now see in Britain, by secularising hostility to specific religions and shifting the basic ground rules, when added to the decline in the number of religious organisations that plausibly claim unique legitimation, suggests that we should rethink our system of classification.

Two processes have reduced the utility of the church-sect-denomination-cult typology shown in Figure 1. We have focused on the ‘external conception’ axis: increasing tolerance in conjunction with decreasing orthodoxy means that sects and cults are no longer regarded as especially deviant, while churches and denominations are not necessarily respected. All religious groups hover in status between the old categories of denomination and cult, to be spoken about politely or rudely, according to circumstances. At the same time, however, one end of the ‘internal conception’ axis has been eroded by modern ideologies of pluralism and equality. Even believers have trouble with the idea of unique legitimacy, implying a kind of fundamental superiority. The Pope himself could not explicitly claim churchly authority (for example, by describing other Christian groups as ‘defective’) without being seen as an extremist (Carroll). Dogmatism has not disappeared, but doctrinal intolerance does poorly in a live-and-let-live world.

Perhaps typologies of religious movements have outlived their usefulness; still, it is worth considering what distinctions are now most relevant in classifying groups. One possible alternative schema could be based on two important ways an organisation can offend modern sensibilities: by restricting the liberty and self-expression of its members and by proclaiming the wrongness of the world or of rival beliefs and practices (Figure 3). These axes are related to the idea of deviance or tension, but they capture somewhat different features of the situation. They represent in some respects a return to emphasising the group’s own definition of what membership entails.

Religious groups are more or less tolerant of outsiders’ ways on the one hand and lax or strict to varying degrees about the beliefs and behaviour of their members on the other hand. Liberal denominations or cultic groups that regulate the lives of their adherents to a minimal extent and do not aspire to exercise power over others represent the common religion of the highly developed world. The path of intense devotion pursued by monastic orders, British Pentecostals,

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<th>Policy towards adherents</th>
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<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Activist</td>
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Figure 3. A New Typology of Religious Organisations.
Hasidic Jews, and others involves a degree of separatism; such groups do not directly confront rival religions or seek to reform mainstream society. By contrast, some religious groups may be committed to conversion or social action. The internal policies of these activists may be relatively relaxed: evangelists are often more interested in saving souls than in controlling the behaviour of those saved and people inspired by radical theology place more emphasis on social justice than on individual holiness. However, some rigorous traditionalists—in particular the groups commonly labelled ‘fundamentalist’, such as some Christian conservatives, Islamist movements, and so on—make demands both internally and externally. They have ambitions for public policy as well as personal piety—and in consequence are often feared and disliked.

If this typology is to be useful, it must provide a framework for a sociological examination of religious change. A very brief sketch of such an analysis follows.

The choice between participation in liberal or devout religious groups is related to the tension between individualism and community. While many people in modern society are nostalgic for some benefits of life lived in common (physical and emotional security, neighbourly support, meaning derived from a shared culture, lack of isolation), they tend to rebel against any restriction on their individual freedom to believe, say, and do what they please and to control their time and resources with few obligations. We like the idea of regulating others; we are less keen on being regulated ourselves. Being devout has an appeal that rests to some extent on offering what modernity cannot offer; nevertheless it thrives mainly where community is most missed, as for example among migrants.

Secularisation has tended to squeeze out those religious groups in the activist category. There is a long and honourable history of religious leadership in social action, but the increasing influence of those with different worldviews—now a majority in most campaigns—has turned churches into mere supporters. Similarly the days of mass participation in evangelical crusades are over in countries like Britain. Activists whose priorities are social are pushed in a liberal direction; those more invested in religious values find themselves drawn towards rigorist groups.

Rigorous traditionalism works to outflank its rivals, promising to reform the world in accordance with a divine plan and to put personal propriety at the heart of social relations. It thus offers a clear contrast to the moral vagueness, materialist decadence, and individual corruption seen as prevalent in modern society. To achieve their objectives, however, these groups need power, and power is a far more sensitive subject than orthodoxy in the modern world. If individuals want to entertain unconventional views about Atlantis, crystals, Haile Selassie or indeed the biography of Jesus, few will object. If organisations seem to exert coercive power over individuals while aspiring to exercise political power, we are far less happy. Institutional action is frightening in a way that private religious practice is not.

How far the distinctions attempted here between liberal, devout, activist, and rigorist are helpful remains to be seen. What seems clear is that the old form of classification is out of date, at least in Britain, and probably in much of the highly developed world. Religious groups are now more nearly equal in status; in popular perception all can appear denominational on some days, cultic or sectarian on others. Sociologists need a new typology to deal with a new reality.
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