

## Editor's Comment and Call for Papers

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At almost every academic conference I've attended in the last couple of years, someone has come out of the closet. I refer not, however, to the closet of hidden homosexuality, but the closet of religious faith left unacknowledged in scholarly settings. This may be only the latest fad, or a source of moral support for left-wing intellectuals trying to steer their ways between the Scylla of postmodernism and the Charybdis of rational choice theory. It may be only one swing of the pendulum before a revival of Marxism, but I think it's something more than that.

Communitarianism has given impetus to this trend among more or less liberal American Christians and Jews, but the pattern is much broader. Muslim colleagues have quietly excused themselves as they left overlong sessions to go pray; Buddhists have reminded colleagues that their faith is actually religious and not simply some vague "Eastern spirituality."

This shouldn't be altogether surprising, though it calls attention to the extent to which recent academic norms presumed secularism and treated religion as about as tasteful as plaid double-knits. We know from empirical research that religion is widely practiced and socially powerful. The question is, would we know this from sociological theory?

Theorists have written quite a lot about secularization, but rather less about faith. Certainly there is a lot of good sociology of religion, much of it theoretically serious and indeed innovative. But amid our attempts to reconcile action and structure, to grapple with embodiment, to rethink culture and social organization in light of gender, to trace networks of power, and to conceptualize the rise and transformation of the capitalist world system, have we done enough to make sense of religious faith and practice?

This question translates into a variety of more specific agendas for theory and research. How are we doing at: explaining charisma, understanding ritual, delineating the theoretical conditions and implications of secularism? Are we able to rethink our theoretical understanding ritual, delineating the theoretical conditions and implications of secularism? Are we able to rethink our theoretical categories in a way that allows faith to be something other than residual (as, for example, we have still to struggle to give gender and sexuality appropriately central standing)? Are we able to clarify the implications of religious faith as a starting point for theory, or the different strategies open to religious social theorists for relating faith to theory? Have we learned what we could from theology—itself a field in which significant social theory is produced? Do we have good explanations for both the persistence of faith and the ebbs and flows of religiosity?

There is significant research—and at least some theory—building—on all these issues. Precious little of it, however, has appeared in the pages of *Sociological Theory*, or for that matter in other "mainstream" sociological journals as distinct from journals with a more specialized interest in religion. Standard approaches in many branches of sociology deflect or minimize attention to religion. Social movements research has given much less attention to religious movements, for example, than their social importance would suggest, and its generalizations have sometimes been distorted as a result (researchers seem to sample on two criteria: movements that they like and movements that seem odd, and disproportionately the former). The issue is not only one of understanding religion itself, but understanding its impact on other domains of social practice—as for example, religious movements that helped to pioneer tactics, skills, ideas, and organizations that were crucial to other

movements. In my last editor's comment, I called for more studies that seek to advance theory in the cause of contemporary sociological research and understanding, as distinct from those which aim mainly at clarifying what others have already said. In this regard, I complained of tendencies (a) to confuse writing the history of sociology with writing sociological theory, and (b) to substitute restating the arguments of earlier thinkers for engaging their work analytically, or building on it in the effort to understand society better. Most of my mail has been favorable, but some readers think I slighted historical studies and reinterpretations (see the response from Enrique Pumar in this issue). Such articles of course remain an important part of what *Sociological Theory* publishes—and rightly so—though I indicated a preference for those that made clear how they contributed to advancing our efforts to understand the social world.

I would now like to issue a call for papers that advance social theory as a means of making sense of religion—including faith, practice, thought, and institutions. I was tempted to call this “bringing God back in,” but in fact that's only part of the issue. The existence or nonexistence of God is evidently a weak predictor of belief, faith, ritual practice and other dimensions of religion. These need to be addressed on their own terms, and in light of historically specific social and cultural contexts. Directly theoretical questions need to be debated—like whether different theories are more or less compatible with deistic assumptions or more specific faiths. We also need attention to how to theorize the relation of religion to other dimensions of society—as for example, it is in some times and places more strongly institutionalized as a specific and bounded field (in Bourdieu's sense) and in other settings much less discretely bounded, with fewer separate institutions. Some of these aspects of religion have theoretical importance for studies not focused on religion per se: rituals may be secular, faith structures more than belief in God. The boundaries of religion are also necessarily subject to contest—whether the limit cases are Confucianism or comet-watchers.

The goal here is not simply a collection of studies that happen to focus on various aspects of religion. It is, rather, the improvement of the capacity of sociological theory in general to make sense of religion and address issues concerning religion. I propose to collect the strongest submissions (as judged by the usual peer review process) for a special issue to be published as either the last number of 1998 or the first of 1999. If my prayers are not answered by enough really good contributions, those accepted will be published as a symposium rather than a special issue. Since experience suggests that most successful papers go through a “revise and resubmit” process, I would encourage submissions by the end of 1997 (and earlier if possible), though I will try to accommodate those that come in later.