

Teaching Sociology of Religion from a Marxist Perspective

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This reads more like a literature review than an actual syllabus. This is because a Marxist approach to sociology of religion is still in the formative stage. It is my intention that people use this guide to find existing literature within the sociology of religion that fits with a Marxist perspective.

The Sociology of Religion has had several frameworks guiding its analysis including functionalism, interpretive sociology, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and rational choice theory. Absent from this list is a Marxist, Critical, or Conflict approach, which while existing in many other subareas of sociology, has yet to establish itself as a paradigm in the sociology of religion. It has been assumed that Marxism as a school of thought has tended to ignore religion assuming that it is something that would eventually disappear (Beckford 1989:21-22). While this may be true for contemporary Marxism, classical Marxism did pay considerable attention to religion. Marx argued "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism" (Marx 1974 [1843-4]:243)- that before one can engage in an a critique of the material conditions, one must first engage in a critique of religion because this is what prevented people from objectively seeing material reality. While Marx sought to purge the dialectic from its theological elements in his critique of Hegel, idealistic components managed to sneak in (Marx 1977 [1873]:103). Part of Marxism's appeal was due to its retention of theological elements from Hegel. However, if Marxism is to continue developing as a social science, it must engage in a critique of itself either by purging itself of theological elements or at least by being self-consciously aware of them.

Classics

Unlike Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx is not considered by most sociologists of religion to provide one of the foundations for the subdiscipline. Marx's writings

on religion are limited; they are found in his early works: "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: An Introduction," "On the Jewish Question," and "Theses on Feuerbach." Later on, he focused almost exclusively on economics. However, Marx together with Engels and Kautsky provide a significant foundation.

First, both Marx and Engels were influenced by the left-Hegelian, Ludwig Feuerbach who wrote *The Essence of Christianity* (1989 [1841]). Aside from Marx's rather brief and well known "Theses on Feuerbach," [1845] Engels also wrote an essay entitled "Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy" (1941 [1888]).

Quite intriguing is the attention that classical Marxism paid to Thomas Münzer. Münzer, a theologian, who agitated during the German Peasant Revolts of 1524-1525, outflanked Martin Luther to the left and was in conflict with him. Whereas Luther gained the support of the German Princes in his struggle for autonomy against the Roman Catholic Church, the peasants were in revolt not only against the church but the aristocracy, burning churches and castles. Engels (1967 [1850]) describes this in his "The Peasant War in Germany." Karl Kautsky takes up this theme again in *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation* (1897 [1895]). Kautsky provides a much more coherent explanation of the Reformation than Max Weber. He argues that the motivation behind the Reformation was economic- that indulgences were a means of foreign taxation and that the Anabaptism in their rejection of infant baptism were rejecting a national church. This is part of a larger four volume work entitled *Vorläufer des neuen Sozialismus* (1921 [1895]), which Kautsky wrote the first two volumes and half of the third, in which he searches for the origins of communism and finds much of it in Christianity. Kautsky in *Foundations of Christianity* (1972 [1908]) engages in a historical materialist analysis of the emergence of Christianity during the occupation of Judea by the Romans.

Both Weber and Troeltsch need to be seen in historical context. They were engaged with a debate with historical materialism arguing against economic determinism and for the influence of religious ideas on social action. This is revealed by Ernst Troeltsch (1992 [1912]) who spends the very beginnings of *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* arguing against Kautsky's economic determinism. Troeltsch ([1912] 1992:39), argued that Christianity was not the result of a "class struggle." He sees the

otherworldliness of Christianity as a response to the loss of hope of Judea under Roman occupation (Troeltsch [1912] 1992:48). Weber's *Ancient Judaism* (1952) like Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* (1925) engages in a class analysis of the Bible. Kautsky offers a very different interpretation of the Reformation than Weber. Whereas Parsons (1937) has interpreted Weber (1930) as an idealist in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it is Kautsky, in contrast who offers a historical materialist interpretation of the Reformation.

Troeltsch's church-sect theory explain the differences between church and sect in class terms.

the church both stabilizes and determines the social order; in so doing, however, she becomes dependent upon the upper classes, and upon their development. The sects, on the other hand, are connected with the lower classes, or at least with those elements in Society which are opposed to the State and to Society; they work upward from below, and now downwards from above (Troeltsch [1912] 1992:331).

The basis of Troeltsch's Church-Sect Theory is the Anabaptists which were the first Protestant sect.

Randall Collins (1994:81-81) categorizes Weber as having a conflict approach. This is true for his sociology of religion. In English translation, Weber has of five books on religion: *The Protestant Ethic*, *Religions of China*, *Religions of India*, *Ancient Judaism*, and *Sociology of Religion*. Coming out of the German tradition of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, Weber could not avoid making use of dialectics. This is most apparent in *Ancient Judaism*, the last book in his unfinished project *The Economic Ethic of World Religions*. In it, not only is there a class analysis of biblical history, but there is a dialectic between the charisma of the prophet and the tradition of the priest, between value rationality and substantive rationality (Goldstein 2005).

While Durkheim's functionalism represents the paradigmatic opposite of a conflict approach, nevertheless in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he does describe the relationship between the sacred and profane as contradictory.

H. Richard Niebuhr who was a "Christian Socialist", looked at denominational differences on the basis of class,

region, race, and ethnicity. Niebuhr ([1929] 1987:29-30) sees sects as religious movements which are class based.

Old Paradigm

The Old Paradigm in sociology of religion categorizes those proponents of the theory of secularization (Dobbelaere 1981; Tschannen 1991). The major approaches in the old paradigm are functionalists (Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, and Niklas Luhmann) and phenomenologists (Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann). Asides from this, members of the old paradigm can also be divided along Durkheimian and Weberian lines. While none of the members of the old paradigm are Marxists, several of them use dialectical approaches. The German title of Peter Berger's (1967) *Sacred Canopy* is *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft* (*On The Dialectic of Religion and Society*). Aside from using his phenomenological approach, Berger in this early work shows the influence of Marx. Likewise, although Robert Bellah (1975:83) is a functionalist directly under the influence of Talcott Parsons, in *The Broken Covenant*, he has a dialectic of "revolution and constitution, conversion and covenant." Finally, of all the secularization theorists of the old paradigm, Richard Fenn (1978) most explicitly sees the process of secularization as occurring in a dialectical manner.

New Paradigm

What has been proclaimed as the new paradigm by R. Stephen Warner (1993) in the sociology of religion is actually an alliance between rational choice theorists (Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Laurence Iannacone) and symbolic interactionists (Warner, Mary Jo Neitz, and Nancy Ammerman). All of the members of the new paradigm dismiss the theory of secularization. The rise of the new paradigm coincides with the rise of the religious right. Most of them have an uncritical perspective on religion and embrace religious revival seeing none of its negative consequences. Sociologists of religion using a rational choice approach use a market model (religious economies) in analyzing religion. This approach, coming out of the University of Chicago and using the term supply-side to describe itself, shares much in common with neo-conservatism. Stark and Finke (2000:154) draw off the church-sect theory of Reinhold Niebuhr while dismissing his Christian socialism. However, they have whitewashed and sanitized it. Stark and

Bainbridge (1985) have dedialectized church-sect theory by turning it into a pendulum.

Marxist and Conflict Approachs

While the number of those adhering to a Marxist sociology of religion has been limited, the potential contributions of Marx to the the sociology of religion should not be ignored (O'Toole 1984:69). Bryan Turner (1991) in *Religion and Social Theory* attempted to develop a Marxist materialist sociology of religion.

Conflict theory, as articulated by Lewis Coser (1956), Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) and Randall Collins (1975), discusses the limitations of Marxist theory rather than embracing it. What they point out is that conflict can occur along many different lines only one of which is class conflict. In none of them is the conflict dialectical. One of the other lines along which conflict can occur is religious conflict. Religious conflict can take place along class lines but it can also take place along economic lines which are not necessarily those of class (i.e. ethnicity, race, etc.).

Although a conflict approach does not exist in the sociology of religion, certain works contain the basis for one. James Davison Hunter (1991), Robert Wuthnow (1988) and Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (1987) describe a religious divide in the United States. For Wuthnow, in *The Restructuring of American Religion*, whereas the older division was between Protestants, Catholics and Jews, the newer division is between religious liberals and religious conservatives. In *The Culture Wars*, James Davison Hunter describes alliances between evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, and orthodox Jews, on the one hand, and progressive Protestants, Jews, and Catholics on the other. Roof and McKinney in *American Mainline Religion* look at how the division takes place along the spectrum of denominations

The Critical Theory of Religion

Rudolf J. Siebert (2001 [1985]) has coined the term a "critical theory of religion" and has been developing it for the last thirty years. He and his student Michael Ott (2001) are inspired by the later work of Max Horkheimer (1978) who was director of the Institute for Social Research (the Frankfurt School). Critical Theorists and their associates, Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter

Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Jürgen Habermas can provide the framework for a critical sociology of religion.

Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch are unique in that they mixed Judeo-Christian Messianism with Marxism. Bloch (1918) first juxtaposed Messianism with Marxism in the *Spirit of Utopia* which was written during World War I. Bloch's most explicit mixture of Messianism and Marxism is contained in the section "Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse." Bloch's mixture of Messianism and Marxism continue in his early work *Thomas Münzer, Theologe der Revolution* (1921). In it, he discusses how Münzer's political revolution was guided by theological concepts. Bloch's work on Münzer is based on Engels and Kautsky. Whereas in his early work Bloch mixes Messianism and Marxism, in his later writings, Bloch develops a dialectical theory of secularization of Judeo-Christian Messianism into Marxism, which is based on a contradiction between the belief in God and man's belief in himself.

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Walter Benjamin, who was highly influenced by Bloch, like him mixed theological and materialist motifs in his essays on Proust, Kraus, Kafka, and Leskov. However, his most explicit mixture of Messianism and Marxism is contained in the last essay which he wrote shortly before his suicide while fleeing from the Nazis, "On the Concept of History."

Erich Fromm (1950; 1960; 1963; 1966) and Wilhelm Reich (1976) as Marxists Freudians have also engaged in analysis of religion. Freud (1939, 1950) also engaged in a critique of religion arguing that it was a form of neurosis.

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1991), Horkheimer and Adorno have a dialectic between myth and enlightenment, faith and reason, and reason and understanding, where Enlightenment becomes a new myth. In Adorno's (1973 [1966]) late work, *Negative Dialectics* he sought to purge the dialectic of its theological elements.

In Habermas' (1992; 2002) recent work, he has focused on religion (see also Habermas and Ratzinger 2006).

Warren S. Goldstein (2001) analyzed the relationship between Walter Benjamin and Ernst's Bloch mixture of Judeo-Christian Messianism and Marxism through their dialectical theories of secularization. A special issue of *Critical Sociology* (31/1-2) was devoted to the relationship between Marxism and religion. The edited volume *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice* (Goldstein 2006) establishes the critical theory of religion as an alternative paradigm to rational choice.

Others looking at religion through a critical or Marxist perspective include Christopher Brittain, Kenneth MacKendrick, Andrew McKinnon, George Lundskow, and Roland Boer (2007).

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