

Religion: Terms of Engagement with the Social Sciences

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The discourse of religion comes to the academic table with a long history fraught with conflict and change. Historically, scholars of religion have disagreed over a universal definition for religion. However, a number of publications have recently taken a step back to look at the genealogy of the discourse of “religion” as a proper object, independent of the other spheres of social life. These works receive publicity within the walls of religious studies departments, though their pertinence also extends to other departments. This paper will bring the current scholarship trends within the religious studies departments to bear on works written on immigrant religion by sociologists in order to shed light on the positions, acknowledged, or not, taken by sociologists vis-à-vis their object of study. The works examined include: Will Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, Peggy Levitt’s *God Needs No Passport*, Paul Bramadat and David Seljak’s *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, Peter Kivisto’s article *Rethinking the Relationship between Ethnicity and Religion*, and Corwin Smidt’s *Religion as Social Capital*. The current debates include one conflict that has been going on for some time, and one area of research more recent to the field. Traditionally, religious studies has been divided on the issue of whether religion is a sui generis phenomenon or not, and whether it should be studied in non-reductionist or reductionist terms, respectively. These terms refer to a debate that occurs in religious studies wherein religion is viewed as a phenomenon that arises independently of other causes and phenomenon (sui generis), or, as non-sui generis: historically contingent, and the product of socioeconomic and political factors. The authors engaged in this paper participate in both positions, in some cases deploying

rhetoric from both sides of the division to characterize their stance. As mentioned earlier, an ongoing discussion more recent to the field addresses the historical events and socio-political situations that background the formation of religion as an independent phenomenon and area of study in the first place. It examines the implications that this genealogy has on the contemporary understanding of religion in general, as well as the particular understanding of a “world religion”. These sociologists all participate in this discourse in different ways, and this paper examines in what ways they challenge or reinforce the assumptions inherent in the study of religion. The aim of this paper is not to offer a corrective to the perspectives proposed by sociologists in their discussion of immigrant religion, but rather to uncover the assumptions and expose the discourses that are silently at work in their publications.

“Religion” as an object of study, in the way we understand the term today, coalesced in the context of the project of cultural comparison. In the face of increasing awareness about and interaction with other cultures due to colonial expansion and wars, religion began to be demarcated as part of a process of identity solidification on the part of the West. Talal Asad, author of *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* points to the wars of religion in the 17th century as factors that led to the increased European awareness of other religions, which in turn motivated scholars to better define and understand their own religion in relation to the other: “In the 17th century, following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman church and the consequent wars of religion, which tore European principalities apart, that the earliest systematic attempts at producing a universal definition of religion were made” (Asad 1993, 40). Tomoko Masuzawa, author of *The Invention of World Religions* generally agrees with

this timeline, and adds that along with the wars of religion and colonial expansion, European culture was undergoing a process of secularization, and began to see religion as a phenomenon distinct from other areas of life. The three Western sciences - political science, economics and the social life of citizens - were gradually becoming disassociated from the control of church authority and becoming increasingly liberated from the sphere of religion. “In contrast, every region of the nonmodern non-West was presumed to be thoroughly in the grip of religion, as all aspects of life were supposedly determined and dictated by an archaic metaphysics of the magical and the supernatural... The presence, or rather the supposed predominance, of religious and supernatural elements was believed to mark tribal society as decisively different from modern European society” (Masuzawa 2005, 16). Thus not only was the study of religion encouraged in order for the West to understand itself in relation to the other, but from the beginning, it was a project of evaluative intent. Religion as understood in the West was in the process of disappearing as the West modernized, and thus belonged in the private sphere. Ultimately, the West did not produce a disinterested definition; the facets of religion emphasized inevitably conflated Christianity and the modern West, ascribing them a superior place in the hierarchy of civilizations.

Because the discourse of religion was being worked out in a time of identity crisis for Europeans, it reflects some of the insecurities that plagued Europeans in the face of the discovery of other peoples. The Europeans were particularly taken aback by the populous religions with a textual tradition that in some cases predated their own. The earliest definitions of religion were worked out with the modern West in mind, thus the

earliest definitions of religion mimicked the characteristics of Christianity in an increasingly secular, rational world.

The Catholic Church historically exerted a considerable influence on definitions of religion, pre-secularization: “In the Middle ages such discourses ranged over an enormous domain, defining and creating religion: rejecting ‘pagan’ practices or accepting them; authenticating particular miracles and relics; authorizing shrines; compiling saints’ lives; requiring confession” (Asad 1993, 37). Later, with the deterioration of Church power and the rise of social sciences, religion as a proper object with definable boundaries, was formed alongside the idea of a secular space. Again, the churches contributed to the formation of “religion”, distinguishing it from the secular, “shifting as they did so, the weight of religion more and more onto the moods and motivations of the individual believer. Discipline (intellectual and social) would... gradually abandon religious space, letting ‘belief’, ‘conscience’ and ‘sensitivity’ take its place” (Asad 1993, 39). An example of one of these early definitions worked out in the face of secularization, was Lord Herbert’s 17th century definition in *De veritate*, wherein religion was characterized by belief (about a supreme power), practice (ordered worship) and ethics (a code of conduct based on rewards and punishment in afterlife) (Asad 1993, 40).

The emphasis on religion as a matter of individual belief signals the beginning of religion as a phenomenon which does not belong in the public sphere. The relegation of religion to the private sphere is a position that has been made normative by subsequent scholarship in both religious studies departments and other social science departments. As Bramadat and Seljak note, “There is also a fairly deeply entrenched general assumption in federal, provincial and municipal governments, and in the broader society,

that religious life should be considered private, as something the state and polite adults should consider off limits” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, 6). The idea that religion belongs in the private sphere is the result of the discursive process wherein religion became primarily the domain of beliefs. Correct religion consisted of orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy. Bramadat and Seljak emphasize that the belief of adherents in the uniqueness of their religion is what constitutes “one of the underlying assumptions of this book, [that] each religion in contemporary Canada is authentic in its own way,” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, 18). Herberg also upholds the definition of religion as a matter of belief, and importantly, views religion as something with boundaries that set it apart from other human phenomena: “objective inquiry, analysis, and forecast become rather dubious if not altogether irrelevant, for man’s faith in response to God’s call is not something that can be charted or reduced to plan. When we deal with the religious situation, we are brought up short before the final mystery” (Herberg 1955, 4).

The construction of religion (originally Christianity) as a bounded phenomenon sets the norm for the way any religions can belong in the public sphere. Though the discourse of pluralism is rarely questioned, it is nonetheless based on a certain historically contingent concept of religion, which is comprised of beliefs and opinions unfitting for presence in the public sphere. Authors in both religious studies as well as the social sciences have begun to question the assumptions inherent in pluralism, as this quote from Peggy Levitt demonstrates: “we tell ourselves we are religiously diverse even when our expectations about what religion is and where to find it are based on Christian models. While American culture claims secularity and tolerance, it in fact demands religiosity, and that of a certain kind, which leaves increasing numbers...out” (Levitt

2007, 11). In this quote, Levitt draws attention to the assumption that pluralism necessarily involves the exclusion of religions which do not see a distinction between public and private spheres in the way that American religiosity does, from participation in a “pluralist” society.

When it is proposed that religion can play a positive political role in modern society, it is not intended that this apply to *any* religion whatever... Ever since Habermas drew attention to the central importance of the public sphere for modern liberal society, critics have pointed out that it systematically excludes various kinds of people, or types of claim, from serious consideration (Masuzawa, 2005, 183).

Pluralism requires that religious people come to the discussion with the assumption already held that religion should not be involved in the public sphere.

Along with the rise of “religion” as a definable object, the discovery of the texts of other religious tradition encouraged a flurry of activity, cataloguing and describing foreign traditions in order to understand where they fit into the newly created schema. “World religions” as a category was originally a project of comparison and evaluation, due to its descent from the work of Christian evangelicals. From the beginning an evaluative distinction was made between “national” and “world” religions. “World religions” were not restricted to a certain locale, or a certain people, but bore a transcultural, transhistorical significance. Christianity, and later Buddhism were the first bearers of this designation. In contrast, “national religions” were conflated with the geographical, cultural, ethnic character of its people, and bore significance only for those people. Islam was a religion that was cited in this case, as was Judaism, despite their numerous adherents worldwide. The distinction between “national” and “world” was originally contentious because there was never any consensus on the criteria of these

designations. Masuzawa sums up the different viewpoints in the following questions: “Is the universality of a religion a question of ‘a fact or a quality’? Is the difference between the particular and the universal a matter of statistics or principle?...How do we distinguish an essentially and inherently universalistic ‘world religion’ from the ones that are only incidentally transnational?” (Masuzawa 2005, 111-112). In the early formulations of the lists of “world religions”, Western scholars with a Christian agenda appealed to a criterion of qualitative difference between Christianity and other religions. For example, Johann Sebastian Von Drey (1777-1853), a prominent German Catholic theologian, made use of these two categories in order to advance a viewpoint of Christian superiority and uniqueness: “In Christianity alone is religion simply open to humanity without any connection to nationality or citizenship; thus the church is free and independent” (Masuzawa 2005, 116). Christianity was believed to be qualitatively different, in that its core message was inherently inclusive and transnational. This was contrasted with the inherently “ethnic” character of Islam or Judaism, whose scripture and teachings reflected concern only with a certain group of adherents. In time, this manner of distinguishing “world religions” from “national religions” fell out of favour, due to its associations with comparative theology which were deemed non-scientific because “it either presupposed or invariably drew the self-same conclusion as Christian theology, that Christianity was fundamentally different from all other religions, thus, in the last analysis, beyond compare” (Masuzawa 2005, 23).

Eventually, “world religions” came to be defined by the number of adherents and their geographical distribution. This system enjoyed so much success that today’s world religion textbooks rarely question the category, nor do social scientists make any attempt

to theorize it, thereby divesting it of its historical character and naturalizing it. Max Weber counted five world religions: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism: “By ‘world religions’ we understand the five religions or religiously determined systems of life-regulation which have known how to gather multitudes of confessors around them” (Weber qtd. in Masuzawa 2005, 306)¹. Weber’s definition reflects the general trend of sociologists who authorized the circulation of the term “world religions” without the same deliberation that characterized its initial circulation in the 19th century. About Weber’s discursive move, Masuzawa states, “Weber was clearly not party to the debate as to what essential and qualitative differences might exist between the world religions and the non-world religions. Rather, he appears to have settled for a seemingly mechanical, somewhat arbitrary criterion of merely statistical significance - sheer numbers,” (Masuzawa 2005, 206).

The final list of the world religions arrived at in the 20th century includes: Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, and less frequently, Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism. These are generally categorized by geographic location, by number of adherents, and very rarely, by qualitative differences that are supposed to exist between them. Sociologists of religion are inclined to take this list for granted, though numbers were not always an accepted way to evaluate the status of these traditions. Evidence of the success of this discourse is to be found in the absence of any questioning of the term, the method of evaluation or the included religions. For example, in Bramadat and Seljak, they speak of “world religions” but do not offer a list,

¹ Max Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” in *From Max Weber*, pg. 267.

for the assumption is that it is self evident, “Anyone who spends some time with members of one of the world’s religions, especially one that is spread out over a few continents, will realize that religion is in many ways a wrought object, a complex set of phenomena that are all called ‘religion’, but which are in some ways disparate” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, 13). In the context of discussing ethnicity, Bramadat offers us a partial list of “world religions”: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Chinese religion, and Sikhism. This list can afford to be partial because of the expectation that the readers already know which major world religions they will not be discussing.

The construction of religion had a significant effect on the self conception of other religious traditions. As the West was working out its own identity in conjunction with the designation of religion, it was also disseminating a certain understanding of religion to which other cultures adapted. “For the entire phenomenon (of religion) is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained” (Asad 1993, 29). For religion to be a valuable marker of identity, its boundaries have to be secure, and its internal structure constant. These ideas of religion, along with the Western scholar’s disposition to accord a greater value to religious traditions with a textual canon, had a great influence on other cultures who were beginning to articulate their own identities in this atmosphere of overwhelming Western influence. Western expectations were that all religions would define themselves (in Western terms), affirm something about reality as they perceived it, and have a textual tradition which gave evidence of this.

To elaborate, for the West, religious practices never exist independently or simply for themselves; there must always be something that exists beyond the observed practices. Either the adherents do not properly understand their own practices, in which case an explanation will be provided for them, or the practices affirm something nonsensical which must then be corrected. “In one case, religious theory becomes necessary for a correct reading of the mute ritual hieroglyphics of others, for reducing their practices to texts; in the other, it is essential for judging the validity of their cosmological utterances” (Asad 1993, 43). As for the privileging of texts, Masuzawa points to the “discovery” of Buddhism as a “world religion” as a textual construction. “The fledgling science of religion and of Buddhism itself was entirely on the side of the ancient texts; it was singularly devoted to the rigorous critical study of these writings and what they presumably revealed, whereas this science generally presumed that what the native adherents of this religion practiced today was of secondary importance” (Masuzawa 2005, 126). The texts were objects over which the Western scholars maintained a monopoly, and armed with them, the West was able to construct a “true” religion, uncorrupted by the contributions of the adherents. Hinduism - a deceptive term that implied undifferentiated unity of tradition which has now come under question - came into existence under the influence of colonial interest in India and demonstrates the effects of Western expectations. Hinduism was elevated to the status of “world religion”, after the discovery and subsequent appropriation of its Sanskrit textual tradition (Masuzawa 2005, 283). Not only did the Western scholars essentialize and publicize the “true” meaning of Hinduism, but the colonized intellectuals also appropriated the terms of the discourse to express themselves under a unified tradition, thereby gaining more

respect in the global intellectual sphere. It was a “mutually interactive development, on the one hand, of European representation of non-Christian religions, and on the other hand, the native appropriation, reaction or resistance to such representations” (Masuzawa 2005, 282). The view expressed by this interaction was that Hinduism “refers to the ancient faith of India, a religion that was originally and essentially monotheistic, and whose ancient wisdom is encapsulated in certain select but voluminous canonical texts” (Ibid).

Ultimately, these requirements reinforce the hegemony of the West and secure the authority of Western discourse vis-à-vis the culture studied. The ancient texts were available to these scholars, who, looking for an essential essence, could distil the proof for their theories from the corpuses made available to them. Asad describes this cultural translation as part and parcel of the political relationship between the West and third world societies. The reason that non-West cultures are translated into Western terms, and rarely vice-versa is “first, than in their political-economic relations with third world countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And second, Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than third world languages do” (Asad 1993, 190).

As mentioned earlier, designation of the term “religion” involved a comparative agenda which consolidated the identity of the West, and which placed it in a powerful position vis-à-vis other cultures and religions of the world. The basis of comparison, which has remained a salient measurement up until modern times, assumes a transcendent essence which all religions share, variously called “the sacred” or, “the holy”. The positing of an essence of religion, and the corresponding phenomenological

method are important components of the science of religion, “Religionwissenschaft”, generally agreed to have arisen in the 1870s with Max Muller. The essence allows all religions to be compared, and evaluated while still according them a status distinct from other human phenomena: “The concept of religion as a general, transcultural phenomenon, yet also as a distinct sphere in its own right, is a foundational premise essential to the enterprise of the history of religions” (Masuzawa 2005, 319).

Phenomenology, a sub-discipline of comparative religions, of which the intuiting of essences is an integral part, is premised on the superiority of non-reductionist explanations of religion. The underlying assumption of the phenomenology of religion is that religions have essences which differ from their historical manifestations, and furthermore, can be divined by way of comparison: “The primary aim of philosophical phenomenology is to investigate and become directly aware of phenomena in immediate experience and thereby allow the phenomenologist to describe the essential structures of these phenomena” (Allen 1987, 274). Essences, or “essential meanings” are the most basic level or structure to which the phenomena can be reduced while still guarding its identity, “One cannot go beyond or remove such structures without destroying the basic ‘whatness’ or intentionality of the data” (Allen 1987, 275). Part of the process of discovering these internal essences involves “bracketing” or suspending one’s biases so that they do not interfere with one’s work of intuiting religious essences. This means accepting the terms of the believer as true, “the phenomenologist must accept the faith of the believers as the sole ‘religious reality’ ... we must avoid imposing our own value judgements...[and] respect the absolute value that believers ascribe to their faith” (Allen 1987, 276).

Phenomenology occupies an intriguing place in the university. It has been roundly criticized for its rejection of the validity of reductionist explanations, and the assumption that one can completely suspend one's biases arising from one's own situation. Yet, it continues to survive, and scholars, whether intentionally or not, advance the theme of "essences" when they engage in a survey or comparison of world religions. Timothy McCutcheon a prominent scholar and proponent of reductionist explanations of religion, maintains that the consideration of religion as socially and historically isolated is the result of:

certain investigative tools, such as the phenomenological method (which through empathic description based on religious insider accounts, constitutes an attempt to determine an ahistorical essence based on an analysis of historical manifestations or instances) and the comparative method, which abstracts a posited sameness from instances of material difference (McCutcheon 1997, 9).

Certain aspects of phenomenology are channelled by some sociologists, notably Will Herberg in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* and to a lesser extent Peggy Levitt in *God Needs No Passport*.

Herberg expounds at great length the positive function of American religion in the constitution of the national character, yet at the end of his book concludes that it is not true religion. He names it a "culture-religion" or "civic" religion, idolatrous in its worship of the American Way, for it is, in effect, setting up an altar to itself. In order to be able to distinguish "unreligious religion", Herberg must entertain some notion of an essence that "true religions" have. Herberg maintains a complicated position; on the one hand, he acknowledges religion as a site for identity formation, and as therefore belonging to the sociocultural sphere, and on the other hand, religion is seen as something that is not just "set apart" by society, but something that is *fundamentally* set apart. He later echoes the

sentiment that analysis of religion is inherently limited as we can never truly understand it:

The religious situation is indeed in one sense a part of the social and cultural situation and therefore subject to scrutiny and analysis. But in another sense it is something that transcends the social and cultural framework in which it is embedded, and takes on a dimension that relates it to the divine-human encounter to which it ultimately refers... No one who has given any serious thought to the problem of religion can have escaped this sense of depth beyond depth in dealing with his subject, or have failed to become conscious of the inherent limitations of objective study (Herberg 1955, 4).

For Herberg, the “radical demand of faith” is not something that is met by American religion, rather the function that its religion serves, being a marker of sociability and belonging, is the mark of its failure to embody the characteristics of a true religion:

“What should reach down to the core of existence, shattering and renewing, merely skims the surface of life... Religion thus becomes a kind of protection the self throws up against the radical demand of faith” (Herberg 1955, 260).

Peggy Levitt also shares elements of non-reductionism with Herberg. Her thesis is that religion is the “ultimate boundary crosser” because its fundamental nature is one of faith, rather than any particular national or geographical essence. However Levitt does not seem to share Herberg’s conviction that true religion is something fundamentally set apart from society. Faith traditions and the religious landscapes they give rise to, interact with the physical world and in a process of interaction change both the religious landscape and the physical landscape. Levitt’s focus is pluralism, and in agitating for a “true” religious pluralism that leaves no one out, she understands faith as a fundamental element that is shared among religions, and which tends to get obscured by the conflation of practice with faith. For Levitt, it is important to not reject religions because their outer

form differs from one's expectations of what proper religious practice signifies. Levitt says, "Many immigrants bring a much broader understanding of what religion is and where to find it," (2007, 15) and that "Migrants also bring different understandings of what membership in a religious community means" (2007, 16). Therefore, in the interest of religious pluralism, one must look beyond the outward, historical manifestations of the faith tradition, and discern the unifying essence that all religions share, and which allows them to exist in mutual respect and harmony. "Faith is an individual affair not a collective experience. So when Muslims silently say their prayers while stopped at a traffic light because there is not place nearby to pray, they are...talking back to Christian expectations about faith" (Levitt 2007, 16). Levitt's project of religious pluralism relies on the assumption that religions share an irreducible "religiousness" that differs from its historical manifestations. Thus, one should not expect the same historical manifestation (worship patterns, expositions of faith,) among different religions, but rather, accept all religions and their practices as equally valid.

However, non-reductionism, despite its continued strength does not monopolize explanations of religion. Robert Segal, another scholar of reductionism, criticizes the viability of non-reductionism's mandate to fully 'bracket' one's biases in the investigation of a phenomenon. He disagrees with the notion that taking the viewpoint of the believer is the only legitimate way to discern the true meaning of religion. Segal also takes issue with the assumption that religion has a prior essence existing outside of historical, material circumstances. Both Robert Segal and Timothy McCutcheon especially critique this latter idea, as it dehistoricizes the political circumstances of religion, and thereby can continue to sanction the ongoing inequalities in power relations.

In claiming the superiority of reductionist explanations, Segal cites the non-reductionist injunction to ‘appreciate the believer’s point of view’. For Segal, the appropriation of the believer’s viewpoint is both impossible and undesirable. “A nonbeliever can appreciate some aspects of a believer’s point of view... for example, the serenity or the security religion provides... The decisive issue is whether he can appreciate the reality of religion for the believer. For how can he do so except by considering the divine real himself?” (Segal 1983, 109). For Segal, accepting the terms of the believer not only as true for the believer, but *as the only authentic way to represent the true meaning of religion*, is to doom religion to a fundamental misunderstanding by those non-believers who cannot accept the viewpoint of the believers:

Contemporary interpreters see correctly that to reduce the terms of a religious discourse is to fail to appreciate it in its own terms and is in that respect to keep it alien. What they overlook is that to retain those terms is, for nonbelievers, to fail to appreciate the phenomenon in any terms and is therefore to keep it far more alien (Segal 1983, 113).

McCutcheon goes on to say that when the project of comparative religions denies the historical specificity of human beliefs and practices, via the automatic exclusion of certain explanations for religion in the place of ahistorical essences, and that there are political consequences for the people studied:

By decontextualizing human beings in this manner one avoids confronting the relations between material, cultural productions (e.g. a myth one studies) and the concrete political and economic conflicts and inequalities of the people under study. By avoiding the study of such relations, scholars may not necessarily be promoting these imbalanced distributions of wealth or influence, but they certainly minimize the significance of such factors” (McCutcheon 1997, 13).

McCutcheon and Asad, share a very suspicious view of non-reductionism, viewing it as a political strategy, “The more able one is to depict - or manufacture - populations as collections of disembodied believing minds...the better equipped one is to produce disembodied subjects (in the fullest political and subjugated sense of the term) from historical human beings” (McCutcheon 1997, 23). Furthermore, the scholars of religion construct religion as ahistorical in order to privilege their position as the uniquely authoritative expositors of religion, and to guard their position within the university administration, “from their inquisitive neighbours and potential competitors, the anthropologists and sociologists, to name only two” (McCutcheon 1997, 21). Ironically, while non-reductionist scholars feel isolated and threatened within the larger academic environment, they compose the majority within the discourse of religion (McCutcheon 1997, 22).

Reductionist explanations attempt to explain religious phenomena in terms that non-believers can understand, not the terms of the believers themselves. To explain religious phenomena in the terms of the social sciences is thence an effort of cultural translation. This is a more common form of explanation, and one which Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, Corwin Smidt, and Peter Kivisto appeal to.

The definition of religion in sociology has tended to move towards the idea of religion as an identity marker. In terms of the study of immigrant religion, religion is not regarded as *sui generis*, but rather as something that is constructed by its adherents alongside such human phenomena as ethnicity and culture, “While [religion] in Canada has changed significantly in the past 30 years, it remains an important mode of identification for the majority of Canadians; religious communities provide a vital

context in which the concerns of minority groups are expressed” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, vii). While Bramadat and Seljak’s project is comparative of religion thereby presupposing a common structure, they explicitly distance themselves from the idea of religion as an ahistorical phenomenon. These authors assume a position somewhere in the middle between reductionist and non-reductionist discourse. In terms of the non-reductionist characteristics, they are employing the terms of religious discourse of the believer and assuming structural similarities between religions (in terms of belief, and the ‘meaning’ of religion): “we will critically accept and employ the language of the groups we are studying - if they call a thing or a person or a building or an idea religious, so will we... Moreover while the religious traditions we will consider in this book are each unique, they are nonetheless comparable” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, 12). In terms of reductionist characteristics, they view religion as historically contingent and inseparable from the culture of a people: “Acknowledging and illuminating intra-communal diversity... undermines the notion of religion in Canada and elsewhere as an edifice erected once and for all in an historical vacuum... ethnicity and religion are inextricably linked” (Bramadat & Seljak 2005, 18).

In *Religion as Social Capital*, while Smidt acknowledges that religion can exist in the private sphere, its capacity to change the public sphere derives from its status as a public institution. As an institution it shares its history and structure with other public institutions and in this sense is not a wholly unique phenomenon, nor is it sui generis. It is the organization of religion as an institution that provides religion with the potential to produce social capital. Thus, the ability to produce social capital is not intrinsic to religion itself; it is not the result of an autonomous, ahistorical essence, but merely a

result of the church as a particular organization. Smidt is reducing the meaning of religion to its structure, which is historically conditioned, and consequently alluding to the historical contingency of religion as a phenomenon. Because religion is identified with its institutional form it is also identified with the public realm and not, as with of matters of belief, the private realm: “Religion is a form of public life” (Cochran qtd in Smidt 2003, 221) and “can be a space in which opportunity and responsibility for many kinds of public participation are made available” (Smidt 2003, 221). As the former quote demonstrates, when religion is equated with its public, historical expression, it becomes highly relevant in the political realm, but also loses its uniqueness: “religious values, like all other values, help to shape political life” (Smidt 2003, 220). Religion, as a social phenomenon, is seen as any other social phenomenon. Nothing about it is intrinsically unique, nor does it require any special methodology in its field of study.

In Kivisto’s piece on ethnicity and immigrant religion, religion is also viewed as a historically contingent phenomenon, “any religio-ethnic label amounts to an ongoing accomplishment, requiring persistent efforts aimed at maintaining the connection between religion and ethnicity. In other words, the label is always historically contingent” (Kivisto 2007, 493). The connection between the ethnicity and religion is unstable, underscoring the fact that religion is not solely a marker of ethnicity, but one which is only sometimes appropriated by ethnic groups to greater or lesser degrees in the course of identity construction. The acknowledgement of the fragility of the label is perhaps an indication that religion continues to exercise a surplus of meanings that challenges its equivocation with ethnicity. At one point Kivisto speaks to the role that immigrant religion plays in the lives of immigrants. The role it plays is mostly related to its

institutional character and the resources of identification it provides to newly transplanted immigrants, “to renegotiate their identities in the process of adjusting to and claiming a place in the land of settlement” (Kivisto 2007, 498). Both Smidt and Kivisto indicate that the role religion plays in civil society is due to its institutional form and both draw attention to the fact that its manifestation as such is often overlooked (Kivisto 2007, 496). Both authors are reflecting the general sociological stance that humanity exists primarily in groups, and that groups exert a strong influence over human behaviour. Thus, as all human phenomena are group phenomena, religion is no exception, “Religion is a social phenomenon and is in an interactive relationship with the other social units that constitute a society” (Johnstone 2001, 1) and “in explaining group dynamics and explaining group influence – religion qualifies perfectly as a field of sociological study and analysis” (Johnstone 2001, 4).

In surveying some well known authors on the sociology of immigrant religion, it is possible to divine from their writing an understanding of how the discussions within religious studies have filtered into other disciplines, and been represented in different academic milieu. Through its history, religion evolved from a way of being that permeated all areas of life into a phenomenon which belonged solely in the private sphere. This change was effected in conjunction with the rise of secular space which relegated religion to the province of mere beliefs and opinions rather than as political or public mandate. The historical circumstances have not gone altogether unnoticed. Peggy Levitt recognizes that the discourse of pluralism is predicated on a certain understanding of religion, and of public space, which excludes many alternative discourses. Bramadat and Seljak also note the ingrained assumptions that religion is of the private sphere, and

of belief as one of its constitutive elements. Other aspects of religion have been dehistoricized and taken as natural over time. Though it was once a highly contentious issue, the way of distinguishing a “world” religion from other religious traditions is no longer questioned, as shown by Weber’s and Brahmada and Seljak’s casual usage of the term. Finally, the great debate between the reductionist and non-reductionist scholars as to the validity of their respective explanations is echoed in the works on immigrant religion. The non-reductionist position that all religions have an irreducible essence that sets them apart from other human phenomena is accessed by Herberg and Levitt. The reductionist stance wherein religion does not have any unique essence, but is a human phenomenon contingent on socio-historical and political factors is Smidt’s stance, equating religion’s potential to participate in civil society with its institutional structure. Kivisto also equates the importance of religion with its participation in the formation and protection of ethnic identity. Thus, while sociologists perhaps do not debate the term “religion” in the same manner as the religious studies departments, they nonetheless participate in it, taking up modified versions of existing positions and thereby indirectly championing some discourses of religion over others.

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