

RELIGIOUS EFFECTS: IN PRAISE OF “IDEALISTIC HUMBUG”

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Most social scientists prefer to trace all religious phenomena to material causes and are quick to deny the possibility that religion is the real cause of anything. For example, many social historians deny that the Quakers founded the anti-slavery movement because of their religious concerns, claiming instead that, whether they knew it or not, the Quakers really opposed slavery in order to further their economic interests in an emerging capitalist environment. Enough! In this essay I first reveal the absurdity of three major efforts to reduce religious effects to materialism. Next, I show that four major historical events that have been attributed to material conditions are better understood as rooted in religious causes. Then I illustrate that religious doctrines differ in their capacity to produce effects by comparing the responses of early Christians and pagans to several great plagues. This leads to a preliminary discussion of factors influencing the effectiveness of religious doctrines, concluding that the most important factor has to do with the image of Gods on which the doctrines rest. Consequently, the sociology of religion rests upon a sociology of Gods.

Generations of social scientists have embraced a strange doctrine. United in their faith that Gods exist only in human fantasies, they deny that religion can have real social consequences (Stark 1999a). Whatever appears to be a religious effect is, ultimately, merely a mask for something more basic, something “material.”

Although social scientists involved in most other areas of study have long acknowledged the truism that, if people define something as real, it can have real consequences, this usually has been denied in the area of religion. Instead, there has been a general willingness to agree with Karl Marx that any to attempt explain ‘reality’ by reference to an ‘unreality’ such as religion is “idealistic humbug.” Rather, one must explain religion by reference to ‘realities’ such as “the mode of production,” because one “does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice” ([1845] 1998:61).¹ For, as Marx’s collaborator Friedrich Engels explained, “All religion...is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life...the economic conditions...the means of production” (in Marx and Engels 1964:147-148).

These views did not originate with Marx; they have been nearly universal among social scientists for close to three centuries (Stark 1999a). Even Max Weber, having attributed the rise of capitalism to the “Protestant ethic,” then traced the source of the “ethic” to material conditions (including the rise of the bourgeoisie, population growth, and colo-

nialism), thus limiting Calvinist doctrines to being at most a *proximate*, rather than a *fundamental* cause of capitalism. Even so, Weber has been bitterly and frequently disputed for affording religion *any* causal role.² As for Emile Durkheim and his functionalist heirs, they dismissed religious belief as an insignificant epiphenomenon, regarding ritual as the only active religious ingredient and it being merely a proxy for a more basic factor, social solidarity (Stark and Bainbridge 1997).

My thesis in this essay can be summed up thus: guided by their faith that no one does anything for God, social scientists have been unable to see the obvious, that *people often do things for God*, or at least for particular conceptions of God.

To begin, I briefly trace the traditional social scientific denial of religious effects. After that, I examine three major historical cases involving attempts to substitute “materialist” explanations for events long thought to have been caused by religion. I believe I am able to show that the traditional attribution of religious causes is easily defended. Then, I examine four cases for which non-religious explanations have long been assumed, and show that religious causation is far more plausible in each instance. Next, an examination of Christian and pagan responses to the two great plagues that swept the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries reveals that religious doctrines differ immensely in their effectiveness both in *what* they cause and in their ability to cause *anything*. I will offer some criteria of effective doctrines. In conclusion, I suggest that any assessment of what makes doctrines effective leads to the recognition that the vital center of all systems of religious belief is their conception of the supernatural. Hence, a sociology of religion ultimately rests on a *sociology of Gods* — on understanding how *conceptions* of God shape social life. An attempt to construct such a sociology is the focus of my current theoretical and empirical work.

The ‘Mask’ of Faith

Just as Marx reduced religion to an epiphenomenon, to fantasies and illusions growing out of life’s realities, so too Emile Durkheim (1915:206) taught that the fundamental reality is that society itself is always the true object of religious worship: “god...can be nothing else than [society] itself, personified and represented to the imagination.” In effect, when Durkheim said that religion results in social solidarity, all he really was saying is that social solidarity causes social solidarity, albeit refracted through the lens of religious ritual.

Contemporary followers of both Durkheim and Marx have sought to reduce particular aspects of the Gods to aspects of societies. Thus the distinguished social psychologist Guy E. Swanson (1960:16) interpreted Durkheim as proposing that humans “develop a concept of personified supernatural beings directly from the model which their society provides.” And, according to Swanson, the most salient feature of any society is the complexity of its internal structure of authority or governance. He proposed that a society’s image of God or of the Gods, reflects the number of “sovereign groups,” or levels of authority extant in a society. An example of three levels of authority in preliterate societies would be (in descending scope) 1) tribe; 2) village; 3) clan. Analyzing data from the cross-cultural files, Swanson reported that the more levels, or sovereign groups, the greater the scope and power attributed to the divine, concluding that herein lies the social reality

behind the sacred "Monotheism is positively related to the presence of a hierarchy of three or more sovereign groups in a society" (p.81).

Subsequently, in the tradition of Marx and Engels, the sociologist Ralph Underhill (1975:860) substituted "economic complexity" for Swanson's "sovereign levels," concluding: "God, I suggest, is a 'representative of the forces of history.' He is a reflection of existing economic and social relationships."

It seems reasonable to suppose that human conceptions of the divine are in fact conditioned by social and cultural factors, but it seems equally obvious that this is not a one-way street, that social and cultural factors also are conditioned by human conceptions of the divine. However, here I want to note that most sociological writing about religious belief does not deal with conceptions of the divine at all. Instead, the primary focus has been on creeds and it is here one finds the most radical claims that conflicts over doctrine are nothing but masks for more fundamental social divisions. This is such an ingrained view that one need not search radical screeds or obscure journals in pursuit of its naked statement. One need only turn to a celebrated book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) by H. Richard Niebuhr.

In this classic work wherein appears the first statement of a theory concerning the transformation of sects into churches, Niebuhr began with a bitter condemnation of denominationalism as entirely contrary to both the message and the spirit of the gospels. The task he set himself was, as his title announced, to explain the social sources of the countless sects whose existence he regarded as scandalous. His first step (p.12) was to expose the "orthodox interpretation [which] looks upon the official creeds of the churches as containing the explanation of...the prevailing differences." He then sneered at Josephus for entirely missing the point when he contrasted the beliefs of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The primary difference between the two, according to Niebuhr, was not their "religious opinions," but was of "a social character," the Sadducees being aristocrats, and the Pharisees being commoners. "Differences of opinion were surely present between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but these differences had their roots in more profound social divergences. So it is with the Christian sects" (p. 13).

Thus did Niebuhr dismiss the claims by various Christian groups that their differences were of doctrinal origins, citing "the universal human tendency to find respectable reasons for a practice desired from motives quite independent of the reasons urged" (p. 13) for the fact is that "theological opinions have their roots in the relationship of the religious life to the cultural and political conditions prevailing in any group of Christians" (p. 15).

In full agreement with the prevailing social scientific doctrine, Niebuhr asserted that when groups say their dispute concerns doctrine, their real differences concern underlying material or social divisions. Hence, the received wisdom: *Thou shalt not credit religious doctrines with causal significance*. In the remainder of this essay I refute this blind materialism.

DEFENDING RELIGIOUS CAUSES

I begin with three major historical cases for which extremely unparsimonious materialist explanations have been substituted for older, obvious, and efficient attributions of religious causation.

The Anti-Slavery Movement and Capitalism

Organized opposition to slavery in America began among Quakers during the 1740s, initiated by John Woolman who journeyed from colony to colony, successfully persuading many of his fellow Friends to free their slaves and to take a public stand against slavery (Soderland 1985). Woolman was very obviously motivated by personal religious convictions and attacked slavery almost exclusively on religious grounds. The same was true of the prominent Protestant clergy who, during the early decades of the nineteenth century, turned the abolitionist cause into a major social movement, including the famous Congregationalist preacher Lyman Beecher, whose daughter wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the extraordinary evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, who turned Oberlin College into a center of the anti-slavery movement and a key station on the "underground railroad" conveying runaway slaves to Canada. Meanwhile, in England³ too the Quakers initiated the first organized opposition to slavery, founding the Abolition Society in 1787. As the movement developed in England, clergy and devout laity also became the backbone of abolitionism there. Thus, throughout its history on both sides of the Atlantic, the anti-slavery movement was led by deeply religious men and women who agitated for abolition on grounds of faith and whose support came mainly from other devout Christians (Anstey 1975; Auping 1994; Haskell 1992).

What could be more obvious than to conclude that religious convictions prompted the abolition movement? Never fear, social scientists have been able to see through these righteous 'poses' and to reveal that, far from reflecting moral commitment, abolitionism was but disguised "economic self interest" (Ashworth 1992; Davis 1975, 1992; Foner 1970; Williams [1944] 1994). I cite and quote only prominent social historians, not obscure radicals, a fact that may not otherwise be obvious. John Ashworth (1992:182) noted that any objections that the abolitionists were entirely unaware that they acted from class interests rather than religious motives, are refuted by the concept of "false consciousness," which recognizes that "the awareness of historical actors is incomplete, with the result that they misperceive the world around them." He then noted that this "is not a matter of self-deception" for it is:

... society rather than the individual [that] generates false consciousness. In the words of one Marxist theorist, "it is not the subject that deceives himself, but reality which deceives him." When Marie Antoinette told the peasants of Paris (never mind that the story is probably apocryphal) to eat cake when there was no bread, she was not deceiving herself in thinking that they could afford it. Rather, the nature of her involvement in society obscured from her the realization that peasants could not in fact afford to eat cake.

It is appropriate that Ashworth chose to illustrate false consciousness with a false example.⁴ In any event, his remarks were in defense of David Brion Davis' claims that the Quakers "were in the vanguard of the industrial revolution" and opposed slavery because it had become an impediment to the further development of capitalism (1992:45). That it was this, rather than their moral concerns, that motivated the abolitionists is said to be demonstrated by their failure to also condemn the "wage slavery" of capitalist industries (Williams [1944] 1994). As Davis (1992:61) explained:

Quakers demonstrated that testimony against slavery could be a social correlative of inner purity which seemed to pose no threat... to the capitalist order in which the Quakers had won so enviable a 'stake.' As a social force, antislavery was a highly selective response to labor exploitation.

Indeed, Davis (1992:27-30) proposed that a conclusive case can be made against religious motivation because not every Quaker responded to Woolman's appeal to free their slaves—which is about as compelling as to claim that Mother Teresa must have had ulterior motives because not all Catholics have devoted themselves to helping the poor. As for Beecher, Finney, and the other Yankee Protestants involved in abolition, in keeping with their upper class backgrounds, it is claimed that they represented the industrial interests of the North against the agrarian South.

In recent years several social scientists have amply demonstrated that religion did play a major role in the abolition movement (Anstey 1975; Auping 1994; Drescher 1977; Haskell 1992). Indeed, Robert W. Fogel (1989), the most distinguished historian of the material aspects of slavery, concluded that religion offers the only plausible explanation of abolitionism. However, the majority still proclaim the "materialist" interpretation (see Bender 1992). Keep in mind that I am *not* saying that the Civil War was a religious war, despite the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. No doubt many sectional and material interests played an important role in that tragic affair. I do believe that slavery played a crucial role in bringing on the war, but whether it did or not, it is patent that the anti-slavery movement was originated and sustained by religious convictions.

Crusading for Land and Loot

For centuries, historians believed the Crusades to the Holy Land were motivated by faith that tens of thousands of European nobles and knights marched to the Holy Land in order to rescue it from Muslim desecration. It seemed so obvious. After all, they had volunteered in response to a challenge from Pope Urban II in 1095, who stood on a platform erected in a field near the French city of Clermont and bellowed his challenge to a throng of thousands: "Soldiers of Hell, become soldiers of the living God!" We also know that the pope's challenge was met with cries of "*Vieu li volt!*" ("God wills it"), whereupon thousands present cut up cloaks and other pieces of cloth to make crosses which they sewed onto their shoulders, swearing oaths that next spring they would march to Jerusalem. And they did.

But, for the past century or more, we have known better. We no longer are so naive as to believe that anyone would have done something so reckless on behalf of an "imaginary" being. No! The knights really went for land and loot. Having summarized the many economic problems facing Europe in the eleventh century, including the increasing population pressures and land shortages that were said to beset the knightly class, the distinguished Hans Eberhard Mayer² (1972:22-25) stressed the "lust for booty" and the "hunger for loot," that motivated the crusaders: "Obviously the crusade acted as a kind of safety valve for a knightly class which was constantly growing in numbers." He went on to emphasize the need to recognize "the social and economic situation of a class which looked upon the crusade as a way of solving its material problems." Mayer's materialist interpretation represents the views of most modern historians. But it is wrong in all respects.

If the knightly class really had been squeezed financially at this time, about the last thing they would have done was march off on crusades to the Middle East. As Peter Edbury explained, "Crusading was expensive, and the costs were borne by the crusaders themselves, their families, their lords and, increasingly from the end of the twelfth century, by taxes levied on the Church in the West" (1999:95). Even the network of crusader castles and the garrisons by which Christians held the Holy Land for two centuries were not sustained by local extractions, but by funds sent from Europe. Indeed, the great wealth of the knightly crusading orders such as the Hospitallers and the Templars was not loot, but came from donations and legacies in Europe. All told, "large quantities of Western silver flowed into the crusader states" (Ibid.) The crusades were possible only because this was a period of economic *growth* in Europe, "which put more resources and money into the hands of the ruling elites" (Gillingham 1999:59)

Moreover, as hundreds of surviving letters and eyewitness accounts uniformly testify, the crusaders *believed* they were going because God willed it, and that their success was nothing less than miraculous. As Jonathan Riley-Smith (1987:38) put it:

The crusaders were not fools. They...knew how much at a disadvantage they were. They lacked provisions and had constantly to forage. They lost their horses and had to fight much of the time on foot. They had no firm leadership and at times their army disintegrated into anarchy. Yet still they won through. There could be no satisfactory explanation of this other than that they had experienced God's interventionary might.

Of course, materialists will argue that it doesn't really matter what the crusaders believed, since they would have been victims of false consciousness. It may be ungracious of me to suggest it, but perhaps it is claims of false consciousness that are the best example thereof.

In any case, even if we ignore these compelling objections to the materialist claims, there remains a devastating counter-proof. In 1063, thirty-two years before Urban II called for the First Crusade to the Holy Land, Pope Alexander II, backed by vigorous evangelical efforts of the monks of Cluny, attempted to organize a crusade to reclaim Moorish Spain. Here, very close at hand lay great wealth and an abundance of fertile land and the pope had declared that all who fought for the Cross in Spain were entitled, not only to absolution for their sins, but to all of the wealth and "lands they conquered from the infidel" (Runciman 1951:1:91). But, hardly anyone responded and little or nothing was achieved. The materialist interpretation of the crusades falls upon the fact that crusaders were not lured to nearby Spain in pursuit of the rich and relatively easy pickings, while soon after tens of thousands set off for the dry wastes of faraway Palestine and did so again and again. Why? For those convinced by the tradition of religious motivation, as I am, the answer is obvious: Spain was not the Holy Land! Christ had not walked the streets of Toledo, nor was he crucified in Seville.

Heresy and Class Struggle

Beginning in the eleventh century and lasting though the sixteenth, Europe was swept by mass heretical movements: Waldensians, Cathars (called Albigensians in southern

France), Hussites, and many others, culminating in the Reformation. Tens of thousands died on behalf of their religious beliefs. But, maybe not.

Many historians, possessed of excessive sociological imaginations, have claimed that these great heretical movements were not primarily about doctrines and morals, if, indeed, religious factors were of any real significance at all. Instead, they argue, the religious aspect of these movements masked their real basis which was, of course, class struggle. Friedrich Engels (in Marx and Engels 1964:97-123) identified some of these movements, including the Albigensians, as urban heresies in that they represented the class interests of the town bourgeoisie against the feudal elites of church and state. But most of the heretical movements were, according to Engels, based on the proletariat who demanded restoration of the equality and communalism of early Christianity (Engels and many other Marxists have claimed that the early Christians briefly achieved true communism). Engels granted that these class struggles were embedded in religious and mystical rhetoric, but dismissed this as false consciousness. Following Engels, many other Marxist historians have "exposed" the materialism behind the claims of religious dissent. Thus, in 1936 the Italian historian Antonino de Stefano claimed that "At bottom, the economic argument must have constituted, more than any dogmatic or religious discussions, the principle motive of the preaching of heresy" (in Russell 1965:231). Even many historians not committed to orthodox Marxist reductionism have detected materialism behind medieval dissent. For example, the non-Marxist historian Norman Cohn (1961:xiii) reduced medieval heresies to "the desire of the poor to improve the material conditions of their lives" which "became transfused with phantasies of a new Paradise." And, to be honest, some years ago I expressed similar views (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:Chapter 22).

It is hardly necessary to deny that class conflicts existed in medieval times or to suppose that people participating in heresy never paid any heed to their material interests, to reaffirm that religion was the heart of these conflicts. Had their primary concerns been worldly, surely most heretics would have recanted when this was the only way out. It was, after all, only their religious notions they had to give up, not their material longings. But, large numbers of them chose death instead. Moreover, these movements drew participants from *all* levels of the class system. The Albigensians, for example, enlisted not only the bourgeoisie, but in direct contradiction to Engels, most of the nobility as well as the clergy of southern France, and indeed, the "masses" (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992; Mundy 1985). Thirdly, claims that the majority of participants in any given heresy were peasants and the poor is quite lacking in force, even in the instances for which it might be true. Almost *everyone* in medieval Europe was poor and a peasant. Gauged against this standard, it seems likely that the "proletarian masses" were quite under-represented in most of these movements (Lambert 1992). Finally, the emphasis these groups often placed on the virtues of poverty was not, as Jeffrey Burton Russell (1965:234) pointed out, reflective of "a trades-union program or a grange," but were calls for "holy poverty" in opposition to the worldly corruption of the Church. Indeed, I cannot improve on Russell's conclusion:

It is of course possible to press materialist interpretations farther and maintain that though the program of the dissenters was explicitly religious it was implicitly social. The "real" motivations are social, the materialists say, but in their naïveté the dissenters could do no more than express their discontent in religious

terms. These historians make a priori philosophical assumption about what is "real," an assumption that may or may not be justified. And in this question of medieval dissent, the burden of proof lies with the materialists who, in almost Gnostic fashion, seek the esoteric explanation in preference to the simple one.

Russell's quote also gives indication that an ability to see the obvious is being regained among historians. Whether sociologists have reached that stage remains to be determined.

Discovering Religious Causes

In tandem with the assumption that things do not have religious causes, it has been deemed equally obvious that *all religious phenomena have 'material' causes*. Thus, religion is, in all its aspects, mere illusion. Consequently, generations of social scientists have dug as deeply as necessary in order to uncover the 'real' causes of religious phenomena. The following four examples will demonstrate that this assumption is often ill-founded that religious events often derive from religious causes.

The Great Awakenings

A wave of public religious enthusiasm took place in various American cities during 1739 through 1741. In each city, "huge crowds of crying, sobbing people [gathered], thousands upon thousands of desperate souls, asking what they must do to be saved" (Wood 1993:20). Then, at the start of the nineteenth century came widespread reports of similar activities going on in rural areas along the western frontier as again crowds gathered and people moaned and groaned for divine forgiveness. These events came to be known as the first and second "Great Awakenings" and social scientists have devoted a great deal of effort to explaining why each took place when and where it did.

Until recently, all social scientists began their explanations by postulating a sudden, generalized *need* for more intense religion. Thus, William G. McLaughlin (1978:2), regarded by many as the leading authority on awakenings, attributed them to sudden periods of "grave personal stress." Such stress, in turn, has been traced to such "underlying causes" as floods, epidemics, crop failures, business failures, financial panics, financial booms, the incursions of a market economy, industrialization, rapid immigration, and so on (Barkun 1986; Gordon-McCutchan 1983; Thomas 1989). Recently, a far more plausible interpretation of these "awakenings" makes no mention of any intensification of religious needs nor of the impact of social or natural crises (Butler 1982, 1990; Finke and Stark 1992; Lambert 1990; Smith 1983). Instead, these scholars trace the revivals in question to organized religious innovations and actions. Specifically, proponents of the this view note that religious organizations led by George Whitefield in the eighteenth century and by Barton Stone and by Charles Finney in the nineteenth used vigorous and effective marketing techniques to sustain revival campaigns, which later historians have classified as "awakenings." In contrast to scholars who explain that because of various crises "the times" were right for huge crowds to "materialize" to hear Whitefield, the new interpretation stresses that "What was new about Whitefield was [his] skill as an entrepreneur, an impresario" (Lambert 1990:813). In fact, Whitefield may have been the first exponent of mass marketing techniques; certainly he seems to have been the first to apply them to reli-

gion. His revivals were planned several years ahead and climaxed a long campaign to build up local interest. He was a master of the press release and advance publicity, sending out a constant stream of reports on the success of his revivals elsewhere to newspapers in the cities he intended to visit. In addition, Whitefield had thousands of copies of his sermons printed and distributed to stir up interest. Then, as the date of his first revival service neared, he ran newspaper advertisements announcing his impending arrival. All subsequent revivalists from Charles Finney to Billy Graham have based their campaigns on Whitefield's original model. It was from these efforts that crowds "materialized" (Finke and Stark 1992).

As I have clarified elsewhere (Stark and Finke 2000), what Whitefield accomplished was not to exploit new religious needs arising from "the times," but to appeal successfully to needs that had long gone essentially unserved by the lax, state-supported churches in the American colonies at this time, something which Whitefield fully recognized, remarking during his visit to Boston in 1740, "I am persuaded, the generality of preachers [in New England] talk of an unknown and unfelt Christ. The reason why congregations have been so dead, is because they have had dead men preach to them" (Whitefield [1747] 1969:471). Put another way, the first 'Great Awakening' was a supply-side phenomenon. There was no sudden increase in *demand* (although Whitefield's efforts may have activated and intensified it). Widespread belief in a God of judgment and concerns about salvation had been there all along. What changed was a sudden increase in the *supply* of intense religion. It was Whitefield's dramatic portrayals of hell, not fear of an expanding market economy, that caused people to cry out to God.

Medieval Jewish Messianic Movements

For Jews, the messiah has yet to come. But, again and again over the centuries, groups of Jews have hailed his arrival. An early episode resulted, of course, in Christianity. But, it would not be an exaggeration to say that hundreds of other messiahs have appeared in Jewish communities over the past two millennia and such movements were especially common in the European diaspora during medieval times (Cohen 1967; Lenowitz 1998; Sharot 1982).

In his sophisticated analysis of these Jewish religious movements, Stephen Sharot (1982:18) noted the huge literature on messianic movements which stresses that they are:

responses to the disruption of social and cultural patterns... [produced by] a disaster such as an epidemic, famine, war, or massacre. Following a disaster, persons feel vulnerable, confused, full of anxiety, and they turn to millennial beliefs in order to account for otherwise meaningless events. They interpret the disaster as a prelude to the millennium: thus their deepest despair gives way to the greatest hope.

Trouble is that although some messianic Jewish movements did erupt following a disaster, as he worked his way through all of the better-known cases, Sharot (1982:65-66) was forced to agree with Gershon D. Cohen's (1967) earlier study that many movements seemed to come out of nowhere in the sense that they arose during periods of relative quiet and therefore that "disaster was not a necessary condition of a messianic outburst."

Sharot made this concession very reluctantly and in many passages of his monograph he seems to have forgotten it. Nevertheless, his scrupulous accounts of specific incidents often show that a movement was the direct result of religious rather than secular influences. Frequently, an episode began with an individual or small group pouring over the *Kabbalah* (a collection of Jewish mystical writings) out of purely personal motives with the result that they “discovered” that the millennium was at hand. Thereupon they shared this knowledge with others who, in turn, assisted in arousing a mass following. In other instances, someone became convinced that he was the messiah and was able to convince his family and friends (Stark 1999c).

One can, of course, argue that Jews living in medieval Europe were always victims and hence always ripe for millenarian solutions. But constants cannot explain variations, and in as many cases as not, nothing special was going on to cause a movement to arise then, rather than at some other time *except* for direct religious influences in the form of people advocating a new religious message or circumstance. Let me acknowledge that humans often do turn to religion in times of trouble and crises. My aim is not to deny something so obvious, but only to reject it as a necessary condition, and to recognize that religious phenomena can be caused by other religious phenomena.

The Mystical 1960's

A huge literature attributes the “explosive growth” of new religious movements in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s to profound social causes. Particular attention has been given to uncovering the secular causes of the special appeal of Eastern faiths for Americans during this period. Harvey Cox (1983:42) blamed “the most deteriorated, decadent phase of consumer capitalism,” charging that converts to Eastern faiths had “been maddened by consumer culture” (p. 40). Serious journals published equally hysterical explanations. As Thomas Robbins summarized (1988:60), each of these identified one or more “acute and distinctively modern dislocation which is said to be producing some mode of alienation, anomie or deprivation to which Americans are responding.” With her usual grasp of the essentials, Eileen Barker (1986:338) commented “those who have read some of the sociological literature could well be at a loss to understand why *all* young adults are not members [of new religious movements], so all-encompassing are some of the explanations.”

In fact, there was *no growth*, explosive or otherwise, of new religious movements in this era (Melton 1988; Finke and Stark 1992) the rate of new movement formation was constant from 1950 through 1990. As for the brief increase in the proportion of Eastern faiths among new American movements, capitalism had nothing to do with it. Rather, in 1965 the elimination of exclusionary rules against Asian immigration made it possible for the first time for authentic Eastern and Indian religious leaders to directly seek American followers. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of Eastern religious organizations, but the number of actual converts was minuscule. Even so, these movements were the result of religious efforts—of face-to-face recruitment activities motivated by religious convictions.

Post World War II Japanese Religions

Explosive growth by new religions did in fact occur in Japan following World War II. So many new groups appeared that observers spoke of “the rush hour of the gods”

(McFarland 1967). It has been assumed that the cause of this religious fervor was the devastation and suffering produced by the war. But, no similar religious activity took place in post-war Germany or in the Soviet Union, where devastation and suffering surely equalled that of Japan. On the other hand, there also was a religious "rush hour" in South Korea which was hardly touched by the war, at the end of which it was liberated from Japanese rule. But the liberation of Taiwan from the Japanese did not result in any outburst of new faiths.

The common element is religious liberty in post-war Japan and Korea and the lack thereof in Germany, the Soviet Union, and Taiwan. State churches suppress religious competition and dampen all religious enthusiasm (Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000) and the German State church apparatus remained intact in the Western Zone of Germany. In the Eastern Zone, of course, the Soviets repressed all religion and they did in the USSR as well. Thus, new religious groups could not prosper in either Germany or the Soviet Union. But, in Japan, the "MacArthur" constitution inaugurated complete religious freedom in a nation where the government previously had strictly repressed all but a few traditional religions. In South Korea too, a policy of religious liberty replaced the prior Japanese religious repression. In both nations the emergence of new religions took place almost at once. However, the end of Japanese rule brought no similar eruption of new religions in Taiwan because its new Nationalist Chinese rulers did not condone religious freedom.

The notion that the war caused Japan's "rush hour" is further refuted by the fact that nearly all of what became the leading new religious movements in the post-war period originated *prior* to the war sometimes long before. Konko-kyo was founded in 1885, Reiyukai Kyodan in 1925, the immensely successful Soka Gakkai movement was organized in 1930 as were PL Kyodan and Seicho no Ie, and Rissho Kosei-kai began in 1938 (McFarland 1967; Moroto 1976). But, government repression was sufficient to limit them to a small group of followers, often restricted to a single village or neighborhood. Thus, Neill McFarland (1967:4) described them as "innumerable captive and incipient religious movements" and noted that the new constitution allowed "their voice to be heard." As Aiko Moroto (1976:1) noted, these groups originated in pre-war Japan, and what was new after the war was that "these groups came out into the open and flourished." Harry Thomsen (1963:17) pointed out that what was new about these religions was that their new freedom allowed them to utilize "new methods of evangelism." Hence, the primary "secular" cause of the proliferation of new religions in Japan and Korea was merely the legal right to function, and the rest of the story involves actions by religious organizations based on religious motives.

But, we can go further. If we admit that the first "Great Awakening" was caused by George Whitefield's revival campaign, that many medieval messianic outbursts resulted from "discoveries" found in the Kabbalah, that Indian gurus came to America in search of followers, and that small Japanese sects pursued converts when given the right to do so, we then should ask "Why?" Why did George Whitefield embark on his great revival campaign? Why did any number of medieval Jewish scholars pour over the *Kabbalah*? What drove the gurus westward? Why do sect members seek converts? For generations the only answers to such questions that were acceptable to social scientists imputed various psychological conditions or deficiencies as the cause of such "strange" actions (Stark

and Finke 2000). It was taken for granted that no rational and normal person would do such things (although it was presumed that perfectly normal people would labor to decode the obscurities of Freudian doctrine or campaign to save the Redwoods).

Today, many involved in the social scientific study of religion are willing to entertain the notion that George Whitefield's motives, like those of the gurus and of sect members, were mainly religious, that the obligation to proselytize is inherent in some systems of religious doctrines. Moreover, many scholars today will see nothing pathological in efforts by people to study scriptures in the hope of discovering divine plans. To accept these as reasonable actions is, of course, to admit the reality of religious motivation and to credit the claim that doctrines can matter. Once begun along this path, however, there is no stopping with the mere admission that doctrines can matter. Unavoidably, the question arises: Do doctrines *differ* in their capacity to direct human actions? And, of course, the answer is "Yes." Hence, it will be useful here to contrast the responses of early Christians and their pagan neighbors when deadly plagues broke out and to trace the role of doctrine in prompting these differences.

Plagues and Doctrines

In year 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect that it was the first appearance of smallpox in the West (Zinsser [1934] 1960). But, whatever the actual disease, it was lethal. During the 15-year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third of the population of the empire died from it (Boak 1955a, 1955b; Gilliam 1961; McNeill 1976; Russell 1958). At the height of the epidemic, mortality was so great in many cities that Marcus Aurelius spoke of caravans of carts and wagons hauling out the dead. Then, a century later it all happened again. This time it may have been measles. No matter. Both smallpox and measles can result in huge mortality rates when they strike a previously unexposed population. So, once again the entire Greco-Roman world trembled as, on all sides, family, friends, and neighbors died horribly.

In a world in which even soap had yet to be invented, no one knew how to treat the stricken. Nor did most of them try. During the first of the plagues, Galen, the most famous physician of classical times, fled Rome for his country estate where he stayed for several years until the danger passed. But, for those who had nowhere else to go, the typical response was to try to avoid all contact with those afflicted. It was understood that the disease was contagious. Hence, upon having their first symptom, victims were thrown out into the streets where the dead and dying lay in piles. Thus, in a pastoral letter written during the second epidemic (circa 251), Bishop Dionysius (in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.22) described events in Alexandria:

At the first onset of the disease, they [pagans] pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.

It must have caused most people considerable pain and grief to abandon loved ones in this manner. But what else were they to do? What about prayer? Writing during an ear-

lier plague that struck Athens, Thucydides (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.47-55) noted that people soon discovered that “prayers made in the temples” were “useless” and “in the end people were so overcome by their sufferings that they paid no further attention to such things...As for the Gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately.” This was the consensus throughout the empire, based in part on experience, as Thucydides noted. Indeed, if people did go to the temples in search of divine help, usually there were no priests there to conduct rites, having themselves fled.

But that was not true of Christian priests, and the Christians did not abandon their afflicted. In the same letter quoted above, Bishop Dionysius offered a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others.

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Headless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead...The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Lest it be thought that this was mere bragging, it seems highly unlikely that a bishop would write a pastoral letter to his members containing falsehoods about things they would have known from direct observation. Moreover, such behavior was central to the entire Christian message. First, because death is not the end. Second, because the responsibility to care for one another is subordinate only to faith as the duty of all Christians. As William H. McNeill summed up in his classic work *Plagues and Peoples* (1976:108):

Another advantage Christians enjoyed over pagans was that the teaching of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death...even a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war or pestilence or both could find warm, immediate and healing consolation in the vision of a heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends...Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed.

This is how Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, explained to his people that the virtuous had nothing to fear from the plague:

How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives

dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted...Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown...our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travellers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for, not lamented...and that no occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living (Mortality 15-20).

So, what happened? Christians did nurse the sick, not only their own, but many pagans as well, and the result was greatly reduced mortality. As McNeill (1976:108) pointed out, under the circumstances that prevailed back then, even “quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably.” The best estimate is that Christian mortality would have been reduced by as much as two-thirds and the fact that large numbers of Christians survived did not go unnoticed, lending immense credibility to Christian “miracle-working.”

The basis for both the Christian and the pagan responses was doctrine. Christians nursed the sick because Christ had commanded that they do so: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Indeed, Christians did not limit their good works to times of crisis—this was a central aspect of their everyday life, attested by Christian and pagan sources alike. As Tertullian claimed (*Apologetics* 39): “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’”

Among the opponents who “looked” was the Emperor Julian who, late in the fourth century, tried to restore pagan power. Among his efforts was a campaign to institute pagan charities in order to offset the Christians. Julian complained in a letter to the high priest of Galatia in 362 that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for recent Christian growth was caused by their “moral character, even if pretended” and by their “benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead.” In a letter to another priest, Julian wrote, “I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence.” And he also wrote, “...the impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us” (Johnson 1976:75; Ayerst and Fisher 1971:179-181).

Clearly, Julian loathed “the Galileans.” He even suspected that their benevolence had ulterior motives. But he recognized that his charities and those of organized paganism paled in comparison with Christian efforts which had created “a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services” (Johnson 1976:75). By Julian’s day in the fourth century it was too late to overtake this colossal result, the seeds for which had been planted in such teachings as “I am my brother’s keeper,” “Do unto others as you

would have them do onto you,” and “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Grant 1977). In contrast, for all that Julian urged pagan priests to match these Christian practices, there was little or no response because *there were no doctrinal bases or traditional practices* for them to build upon. It was not that Romans knew nothing of charity, but that it was not based on service to the Gods. Pagan Gods did not punish ethical violations because they imposed no ethical demands. Humans offended the Gods only through neglect or by violation of ritual standards (MacMullen 1981:58). Since pagan Gods only required propitiation and beyond that left human affairs in human hands, a pagan priest could not preach that those lacking in the spirit of charity risked their salvation. Indeed, the pagan Gods offered no salvation. They might be bribed to perform various services, but the Gods did not provide an escape from mortality. We must keep that in sight as we compare the reactions of Christians and pagans to the shadow of sudden death. Galen lacked belief in life beyond death.⁶ The Christians were certain that this life was but prelude. For Galen to have remained in Rome to treat the afflicted would have required bravery far beyond that needed by Christians to do likewise.

So there it is. Only trained social scientists ever could have doubted that what people believe influences what they do. Moreover, doctrines differ greatly in the kinds of behavior they can sustain. Christian doctrines fostered a massive effort to act out the injunction to love one another. Pagan doctrines included no such injunction. So, let us now explore some basic principles about what makes doctrines effective, at least in the sociological sense.

Effective Religious Doctrines

A few years ago I pointed out that eventually social scientists would be unable to hide behind cultural relativism vis-à-vis religious doctrines. Given the admission that doctrine matters, eventually we would:

need to confront the possibility that some theologies are inherently more plausible; some are more easily and effectively communicated; some are more able to satisfy deeply felt needs of large numbers of people; indeed, some probably are inherently more interesting, even more exciting, than others (Stark 1987:26).

Nevertheless, more than a decade later, social scientists have yet to pursue these matters. It's not as if I my suggestions were unprecedented. Surely *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was precisely an attempt to identify aspects of doctrine that were effective for purposes of underwriting the rise of capitalism. Indeed, Max Weber stressed the importance of doctrine in much of his work. I happen to think he was wrong about the link between Calvinism and commerce, but my disagreement with Weber is not about whether religious doctrines influenced the rise of the West, but *which* doctrines. I think that the industrial and scientific revolutions were rooted in the general commitment of Christian theology to rationality, rather than in Protestantism alone. In any event, it is not too difficult to notice a number of generic variations in religious doctrines which seem likely to have behavioral consequences.

Before pursuing these matters, however, let me emphasize that I am not attempting to do theology. I am not trying to construct a sound body of doctrine nor am I trying to dis-

cover divine law. Instead, I am trying to discover what makes a doctrine socially effective. What makes it persuasive, credible, forceful, and productive of social results? I suspect that “good” theology maximizes these sociological features too, but my interest is not in theological merit, only in social influence.

Perhaps the first important aspect of effective doctrine is *clarity*. Layers of metaphor and obscure symbolism may stimulate scholarly reflection or meditation, but it takes clear statements to direct human behavior. Generations of Jewish mystics may have poured over the *Kabbalah*, but it was not from this that they discovered how to be good Jews. The essentials of the Law need not be decoded from poetry; the commandments are quite specific which is why they can be kept. In addition, of course, there must be sufficient *motivation* built-into the doctrine. *Why* should one do as directed? Thus, as with good parenting, the expectations should be clear and the consequences equally clear: thou shalt, thou shalt not, *or else*. And, of course, it was the ‘or else’ part of Christianity that underlay the moans and groans for forgiveness voiced by the crowds gathered to hear George Whitefield.

In many religions, what is required is clear enough and the consequences of conformity and non-conformity are equally clear, but the system has very little impact on social life because the *scope* of the demands is very limited. The Greco-Roman Gods required propitiation, but little more. One might go to them in pursuit of specific favors (better health, good crops, romance) in exchange for an appropriate sacrifice as specified by the doctrines, but standards of long term “worthiness” were not applied. Indeed, the concept of sin is not universal, and the extension of sin to include actions done towards other humans is rarer still. All cultures teach that it is wrong to steal and all impose worldly punishments on those caught doing so. But, it adds a potent deterrent to also teach that God knows when you sin and keeps a balance sheet that must be settled in eternity (Stark and Bainbridge 1997). One cannot expect religious doctrines to cause or to prevent behavior that they do not address.

In addition to the scope of the moral and behavioral demands made by a religion, the value of the *rewards* and the *severity* of the *punishments* also are important. Here Islam and traditional versions of Christianity head the list. Each offers an eternal life of unending bliss or unrelenting pain to their followers. In tandem with the liberal views of child-rearing, many liberal Christian bodies these days limit eternal sanctions to those of positive reinforcement. Hell has been abandoned or transformed into a symbol in many denominations. But, even the promise of heaven alone would seem to invest divine commandments with far greater force than do notions of a shadowy, uneventful existence in a netherworld as presented by Greco-Roman religions.

Probably all faiths offer some level of *worldly rewards* in return for compliance, whether compliance merely involves propitiation or extensive behavioral demands. But here too some faiths deliver far more than others. Indeed, by the very fact of demanding more, faiths are able to return more (Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1992, 1994; Kelley 1972; Mol 1969; Stark 1996a; Stark and Finke 2000). Consider the contrast between the early Christians and their pagan neighbors. Because Christians were expected to do unto others, they had the security of knowing they would be done unto. Widows, orphans, the disabled and elderly were looked after; the stricken were nursed; the hungry were fed. Indeed, data taken from monuments and gravestones (Burn 1953) indicate that Christians

lived longer than their pagan neighbors which is the best single summary measure of a superior quality of life. The benefits of Christianity were *tangible*. They also were regarded as *exclusive* to the community of the faithful and as *contingent*. God did not bless unbelievers or reprobates. One must *earn* one's blessings, including salvation.

I have mentioned that doctrines also differ in terms of *plausibility* some simply are more believable than others. Of importance here is that doctrines will be better able to retain their plausibility—to the extent that they are *non-empirical* and thereby impervious to empirical falsification (Stark 1987, 1996b). The chronic weakness of magic lies in its need to produce results here and now which can, therefore, be seen to not have been forthcoming. Religion need not commit itself to such risks and is more durable when it does not.

Finally, doctrines can only be effective to the extent that they can claim to be authoritative. Where did they come from? On what grounds are they to be regarded as true? What distinguishes religious doctrines from non-religious doctrines? The core of any system of religious doctrine is a *general account of existence predicated on a description of the supernatural*. Hence, the authority of a religious doctrinal system is a function of the characteristics attributed to the supernatural. Chief among these is whether the supernatural is conceived of as an *unconscious essence* such as the Tao or Paul Tillich's "Ground of Being," or as a *conscious being*, a God. This distinction is the basis for distinguishing religions as to whether they are "revealed" or "natural." That is, some religions derive from truths "discerned within the natural order" whereas revealed religion "comes from a source other than that of the human recipient, usually God" (Bowker 1997:814). Consequently, there is an immense difference in the *authority* attributed to various systems of religious doctrine: On what grounds are they regarded as true? The authority of Buddhist doctrines, for example, rests on human wisdom, often stated in terms of what a particular master concluded about what it all means. But, in the *Torah* we read: "The Lord said to Moses." Or, Chuang Tzu taught what he had reasoned about the Tao, while Muhammad taught what he had been told. These issues are central to my next book.

CONCLUSION

If conceptions of the supernatural underlie and justify all systems of religious doctrine, it follows that a *sociology of Gods* must underlie all sociologies of religion. What could be more obvious than the need to trace the social effects of differing images of God? Well, one thing more obvious is that writing about the social effects of Gods just isn't done. Indeed, beginning with Durkheim, several generations of functionalists have stressed the irrelevance of Gods as a meaningful aspect of religion. In a long review of Part VI of Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, Durkheim ([1886] 1994:19) condemned Spencer for reducing religion "to being merely a collection of beliefs and practices relating to a supernatural agent." Seen from the perspective of 'real sociology' (i.e. French functionalism):

The idea of God which seemed to be the sum total of religion a short while ago, is now no more than a minor accident. It is a psychological phenomenon which has got mixed up with a whole sociological process whose importance is of quite a different order..We might perhaps be able to discover what is thus hidden beneath this quite superficial phenomenon...

Thus sociologists will pay scant attention to the different ways in which people have conceived of the unknown causes and mysterious depths of things. They will set aside all such metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline.

Thus began a new social science orthodoxy: It is only through participation in rites and rituals that religious effects occur. But, Durkheim and his followers were wrong. I soon shall demonstrate that the *kind* of Gods that groups and societies worship is far more important than any other aspect of their religion. As a hint of things to come, consider the classic proposition: *Religion functions to sustain the moral order*. Most of us have regarded this as the closest thing to a “law” that the social scientific study of religion possesses. But, it’s not true. In many societies there is no connection between religion and morality. Whether or not there is depends upon conceptions of God, not on the popularity of rites and rituals. As I will demonstrate with empirical data for 427 pre-modern and 34 modern societies, the proper statement of the “law” linking religion and morality is: *Images of Gods as conscious, powerful, morally-concerned beings function to sustain the moral order*.

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NOTES

1. Many social scientists continue to oppose the notion that any beliefs or values matter, whether religious or secular. Thus, Ann Swidler: “action is not determined by one’s values...values have little explanatory power...(1986:275-278). “traditional Weberian approaches, which focus on powerful internalized beliefs and values held by individual actors (what I call culture from the ‘inside out’) may ultimately provide less explanatory leverage than newer [sic!] approaches that see culture as operating in the contexts that surround individuals, influencing action from the ‘outside in” (1995:25).
2. Indicative of the biases of social science, Weber has received almost no criticism for his astonishingly crude anti-Catholicism, which he characterized as a regression to primitive polytheism and magic. As Werner Stark (1968:202) put it, Weber ought to have given Catholicism the same “close study he devoted to...Buddhism and Taoism,” in which case he may have overcome the virulent prejudices of his Lutheran origins.
3. Slavery was illegal in England, it was against the slavery permitted in English colonies that these efforts were directed.
4. Had it actually happened, I would prefer to interpret it as the remark of someone quite aware of reality, who chose this sarcastic way of expressing her contempt for the rabble.
5. Mayer is the classic intellectual moderate who agrees with everyone’s theories, accepting the religious causes of crusades on one page and the materialist causes on the next.
6. Many Greeks and Romans did acknowledge an afterlife, but it was a grey and quite unrewarding existence in a netherworld.

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