

SSSR Presidential Address, 2004: Putting an End to Ancestor Worship

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Several years ago a well-known member of this organization asked a young Ph.D. candidate at the start of his oral examination whether he was a Durkheimian, Weberian, or a Marxist. When the candidate said that none of those terms really fit him, he was told that he couldn't qualify as a mature scholar until he had made a choice.

Now, suppose that this young scholar had been a neophyte astronomer. Is it conceivable that he would have been asked whether he was a disciple of Ptolemy or of Copernicus? Surely not, if for no other reason than virtually everything these famous historical figures had to say about the universe is known to have been absolutely wrong! Ptolemy believed that the heavenly bodies circled the earth, having elaborate loops in their orbits. Copernicus put the sun in the center, but kept the loops in the orbits of the planets. Only the scientifically illiterate editors of the Great Books series think anyone ought to be reading Copernicus today. In similar fashion, you can look in every university catalogue and fail to find even one physics course devoted to the thought of Isaac Newton, or even to that of Albert Einstein. Sciences honor their great figures, but they do not study them, knowing that their work is very out of date.

In what follows I will demonstrate that the "big three" in the sociology of religion are as out of date as Ptolemy and Copernicus and that their work is filled with social scientific equivalents of loops in their orbits. Thirty years ago I would have needed to address the "big four," but fortunately since then Freud has been recognized for the charlatan that he was. I am mindful of the fact that many of you have been so well socialized into ancestor worship that you will not grasp my message and will leave this session confiding in one another that Stark is a philistine, sadly unable to appreciate the classics. But I do appreciate Weber, Durkheim, and Marx. I have even read them. What I don't do is *believe* in them, and I will attempt to convince you not to believe in them either.

WEBER

For precisely a century, sociologists have been paying homage to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–1905). In this, his most famous work, Max Weber proposed that capitalism originated only in Europe because, of all the world's religions, only Protestantism provided a moral vision that led people to restrain their material consumption while vigorously seeking wealth. Weber argued that prior to the Reformation, restraint on consumption was invariably linked to asceticism and hence to condemnations of commerce. Conversely, the pursuit of wealth was linked to profligate consumption. Either cultural pattern was inimical to capitalism. According to Weber, the Protestant ethic shattered these traditional linkages, creating a culture of frugal entrepreneurs content to systematically reinvest profits in order to pursue ever greater wealth, and therein lies the key to capitalism and the ascendancy of the West.

Perhaps because it was such an elegant thesis, it was widely embraced despite the fact that it was obviously wrong. Even today, *The Protestant Ethic* enjoys such a sacred status among sociologists that, as both Jacques Delacroix and Randall Collins discovered quite independently,

it is nearly impossible to publish criticism of it in any reputable sociology journal. Ironically, as they also learned, it is equally difficult to publish such an article in an economics journal because economic historians long ago dismissed Weber's monograph as anti-Catholic nonsense on the irrefutable grounds that the rise of capitalism in Europe *preceded* the Reformation by centuries. As Hugh Trevor-Roper ([1969] 2001:20–21) explained, “the idea that large-scale industrial capitalism was ideologically impossible before the Reformation is exploded by the simple fact that it existed.”

Only a decade after Weber published, the celebrated Henri Pirenne noted a large literature that “established the fact that all of the essential features of capitalism—individual enterprise, advances in credit, commercial profits, speculation, etc.—are to be found from the twelfth century on, in the city republics of Italy—Venice, Genoa, or Florence” (1914:495–96). The equally illustrious Fernand Braudel struck a similar note: “[A]ll historians have opposed this tenuous theory [the Protestant ethic thesis], although they have not managed to be rid of it once and for all. Yet it is clearly false. The northern countries took over the place that earlier had so long and so brilliantly been occupied by the old capitalist centers of the Mediterranean. They invented nothing, either in technology or in business management. Amsterdam copied Venice, as London would subsequently copy Amsterdam . . . What was involved . . . was a shift in the center of gravity of the world economy, for economic reasons that had nothing to do with the basic or secret nature of capitalism” (1977:66–67).

Keep in mind that not only were the Italian city-states Catholic, but so were *all* the early centers of northern capitalism, since their critical period of economic development also preceded the Reformation. Moreover, as capitalism shifted northward from Italy many Catholic merchant families moved with it and did not relinquish their faith (Brentano 1916). Even after the Reformation, many leading capitalists in northern Europe, including the celebrated Fuggers, were Catholics. From another angle, John Gilchrist, a leading historian of the economic activity of the medieval Church, pointed out that the first examples of true capitalism appeared in the great Christian monasteries as early as about the ninth century (1969:1).

Weber was aware that economic historians rejected his thesis on the basis of time order. Consequently, he progressively made “his definitions finer” in an attempt to restrict capitalism to very recent, post-Reformation business organizations (Walker 1937:5). Eventually, in his last formulation Weber argued that above all, capitalism rests on formal accounting procedures and record keeping. As he put it in a lecture just before his death, a “rational capitalist establishment is one with capital accounting, that is, an establishment which determines its income-yielding power by calculation according to the methods of modern bookkeeping and the striking of a balance” ([1919–1920] 1966:208). Clearly, Weber inserted the adjective “modern” in order to confound those who argued that capitalism was far older than Protestantism. Even so, Weber did not thereby elude the historical inapplicability of his thesis: double-entry bookkeeping and the striking of balances came into use in Italy about 1300 (Crosby 1997; Peragallo 1938). Hence, even if we accept Weber's most restrictive definition, Europe abounded in capitalist firms many centuries before the Reformation. It seems fair to point out, too, that during the first half of his career when he specialized in ancient history, Weber himself acknowledged the existence of capitalism long before the Reformation (Love 1986; Weber [1924] 1976).

Weber probably was right to suggest that capitalism required a very unusual “ethic.” Precapitalist economies not only celebrate consumption, they also hold work in contempt. This is true not only of the privileged elite, but even of those whose days are spent in toil. Notions such as the “dignity” of labor or that work is a virtuous activity are incomprehensible. Rather, just as spending is the purpose of wealth, the preferred approach to work is to have someone else do it, and, failing that, to do as little as possible. For example, in China the Mandarins grew their fingernails as long as they could (even wearing silver sheaths to protect them from breaking), in order to make it evident that they did no labor. Consequently, Weber believed that the major precondition for the rise of capitalism was the doctrine that work is a *calling*—that God not only

calls some to become priests, nuns, and monks, but calls others to perform the various secular occupations. Hence, to live in accord with God's will one must faithfully fulfill "the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world."

According to Weber, it was this celebration of work for its own sake, a kind of sanctification of worldliness, that provided the discipline needed to motivate work while restraining consumption. Weber identified this conception of work and self-discipline as the "Protestant ethic" because he believed it to be absent from Catholic culture. He claimed that the notion of work as a calling originated with Martin Luther, was refined by John Calvin, and then embraced by "all predominantly Protestant peoples" (Weber [1904–1905] 1958:79). Weber admitted that this "ethic" bore some similarity to monastic asceticism, but he dismissed the latter as so "other-worldly" as to be without implications for capitalism, which arose only from the "inner-worldly asceticism" of Protestantism.

But, just as Weber mistakenly dated the rise of capitalism as subsequent to the Reformation, he also erred as to when work and plain living were defined as virtuous in and of themselves. Rather than being a Protestant "invention," these views and practices arose in monastic Christianity many centuries before the birth of Martin Luther. Lewis Mumford (1967:I:272) pointed out that most of the work habits "Max Weber erroneously treated as the special property of sixteenth century Calvinist Protestantism were in effective operation in the medieval Cistercian monastery." Or, in the words of Christopher Dawson, by their "sanctification of work" the early monastics "revolutionized both the order of social values which had dominated the slave-owning society of the Empire and that which was expressed in the aristocratic warrior ethos of the barbarian conquerors, so that the peasant, who for so long had been the forgotten bearer of the whole social structure, found his way of life recognized and honoured by the highest spiritual authority of the age" (Dawson 1957:52). More recently, Randall Collins noted that the "inner-worldly asceticism" that Weber identified as the Protestant ethic originated in the monastic way of life. Despite the fact that many, perhaps even most, monks and nuns were from the nobility and wealthiest families (Stark 2003b), they honored work not only in theological terms, but by actually doing it. Or, as Collins put it: "They had the Protestant ethic without Protestantism" (1986:54).

This is obvious in all of the "Rules" by which monastic orders governed their affairs. For example, the virtue of work was made evident in the sixth century by Saint Benedict, who wrote in his famous *Rule*: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as prayerful reading . . . When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks" (*The Daily Manual Labor*:ch. 40). Or, as Walter Hilton, the English Augustinian, put it in the 14th century: "By the discipline of the physical life we are enabled for spiritual effort" (1985:3). It is this commitment to manual labor that so distinguishes Christian asceticism from that found in the other great religious cultures where piety is associated with rejection of the world and its activities. In contrast with Eastern holy men, for example, who specialize in meditation and live by charity, medieval Christian monastics lived by their own labor, sustaining highly productive estates. This not only prevented "ascetic zeal from becoming petrified in world flight" (Friedrich Prinz, in Kaelber 1998:66), but sustained a healthy concern with economic affairs. Although the phrase "Protestant ethic" is a misnomer, it can correctly be traced to this "ethic" that arose in Catholic monasticism.

Moreover, this "ethic" came to full flower not in some Puritan stronghold but in 12th-century Italian city-states where it prompted passage of laws prohibiting conspicuous consumption and luxurious lifestyles (Killerby 2002). Money was not to be wasted on fancy clothes, jewelry, or pretentious homes. Instead, it was frugality that earned public respect. Writing of the homes of wealthy Florentines, Christopher Hibbert (1974:21) reported that "even those of the richest families had been furnished with plain wooden tables and the most uninviting beds. The walls were generally whitewashed . . . floors were of bare stone, rarely covered with anything other than reed matting; the shuttered windows were usually made of oiled cotton [not glass]."

Finally, Weber claimed that even in his day, all across Europe Protestants far surpassed Catholics in educational and occupational achievement and that Protestant nations and regions were, and had been from the start, far ahead in achieving industrialization. He seems to have felt that these “facts” were so obvious that no documentation was needed, although he did mention a study by one of his students, the only actual data Weber cited anywhere in his famous monograph. But that study, which purported to show that in Baden, Protestants were more likely than Catholics to enroll in mathematics and science, while Catholics were more likely to take courses in classics, has been exposed as without merit (Becker 1997, 2000; Hamilton 1996). By the same token, Weber’s claims about comparative differences in industrialization were based on nothing more than the anti-Catholicism that prevailed among German academics and were accepted uncritically by equally anti-Catholic American and British scholars. In fact, Protestant regions and nations on the continent were *not* significantly ahead of Catholic places in terms of industrialization (Delacroix and Nielsen 2001; Samuelsson [1961] 1993).

In the words of Jacques Delacroix and Francois Nielson, *The Protestant Ethic* “remains no more than an intellectually enticing hypothesis and a beloved academic myth” (2001:545). I ask, must we be condemned to embrace it for another century? Some of you will be quick to point out that Weber wrote a lot more than this. Indeed he did. But, the fact remains that our progress as a field requires us to think anew, not to become disciples of this very fallible, notably anti-Catholic, writer of abominable prose. Or of anyone else.

DURKHEIM

Emile Durkheim is greatly admired for his definition of religion and the thesis that religion functions to create social solidarity and thereby to sustain the moral order. Both these “contributions” are so badly flawed that they probably set the social scientific study of religion back by at least several generations. As for his definition, Durkheim explicitly excluded belief in gods or any other sort of supernatural entity as a defining aspect of religion. Consequently, he remained unaware that “godless” religions could not sustain the moral order.

Early in his career Durkheim dismissed gods as unimportant window-dressing, stressing instead that rites and rituals are the fundamental stuff 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.” He continued:

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 the sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which men and peoples have conceived the unknown cause and mysterious depth of things. He will set aside all such metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline.

Fifteen years later Durkheim had not wavered in his conviction that gods are peripheral to religion, noting that although the apparent purpose of rituals is “strengthening the ties between the faithful and their god,” what they really do is strengthen the “ties between the individual and society . . . the god being only a figurative representation of the society” ([1912] 1995:227). Thus began a new social science orthodoxy: religion consists of participation in rites and rituals—*only*.

Why did Durkheim insist so vociferously that the gods are only window-dressing, not the essence of religion? For several reasons. For one thing, I have long suspected that the underlying “insight” that directed our attention away from God and toward ritual had to do with the fact that Durkheim and his circle were militantly secular Jews who, nevertheless, sometimes attended

synagogue (Strenski 1997). In their personal experience, the phenomenology of religion would not have included belief in supernatural beings, but only the solidarity of group rituals. These personal perceptions were then reinforced by their voluminous reading of anthropological accounts of the impassioned ritual life of “primitives” by observers who lacked any sympathy for the objects of these worship services.

The second reason that Durkheim excised God was that he was determined to formulate a definition that would encompass all the world’s “religions,” and he quite erroneously believed that Buddhism has no gods. Since he “knew” that all societies must have religions, lest they fall apart from lack of solidarity, he thought it necessary to define religion without reference to gods so as to include Buddhism. But, as anthropologists quickly pointed out, this was a howling error (Spiro 1966a, 1966b). Only the most elite form of Buddhism, prevalent only among small groups of scholars, was godless. Popular Buddhism abounds in gods. Furthermore, even elite Buddhism embraces a supernatural core, albeit a divine essence that is devoid of consciousness and incapable of action—although prayers often are addressed to it (Stark 2001a).

In any event, it is easy to demonstrate that Durkheim’s exclusion of God from his definition of religion was not only premised on an error, but is fundamentally wrong. The case that the supernatural, not ritual, provides the core of religion can be demonstrated in several quite specific and dramatic ways. The first of these asks why there is so much variation in the precision needed for the adequate performance of rituals.

When magic fails, it usually is assumed that the fault lay with the performance: that incantations were not precisely correct or that rituals were not done exactly right. The same assumption applies to most ritual actions performed on behalf of the small gods of polytheism. On the other hand, while there is a correct way to perform the rituals associated with each of the great monotheisms, there is little concern about precision: no sincere Catholic thinks that transubstantiation will not occur during the Mass if the priest gets some of the words wrong or out of order. Indeed, most appeals to Yahweh, Jehovah, or Allah involve a minimum of ritual, often being quite impromptu supplications by ordinary believers.

Recently, a substantial body of anthropological and experimental evidence has been assembled to explain that variations in the importance placed on ritual precision reflect differences in the capacities attributed to the supernatural agent to which (or whom) the rituals are directed (Barrett 2000; Barrett and Lawson 2001; Lawson and McCauley 1990). When, as in the case of magic, the supernatural agent is an unconscious entity or is a supernatural creature of very limited capacity (such as a demon or an imp), it will be assumed that each ritual must be preformed with extreme precision because the supernatural agency lacks the capacity to know the intent of those performing the ritual and is unable to see past errors in ritual performance. This same logic applies, if to a somewhat lesser extent, to religions based on gods of limited scope. They too may not take note of the intent of rituals, but only of their execution. Indeed, there is a substantial element of *compulsion* in dealing with small gods as well as with the creatures that sometimes are invoked by magic (Stark 2003a). Here, too, the rituals must be perfect, otherwise the supernatural agent will not find them binding. In contrast, the omnipotent gods of monotheism are thought to be fully aware of the intentions of the supplicant. Consequently, rituals are far less important and precision is barely an issue when dealing with gods conceived of as all-seeing—if the priest errs Jehovah knows what was meant, and the efficacy of a prayer does not hinge on precise adherence to a sacred formula.

An even more devastating case against the primacy of ritual can be made by close examination of the most popular of all functionalist claims about religion, that *religion functions to sustain the moral order*. Many regard this as the closest thing to a “law” that the social scientific study of religion possesses. As formulated by Durkheim, religion exists *because* it unites humans into *moral communities*, and while law and custom also regulate conduct, religion alone “asserts itself not only over conduct but over the *conscience*. It not only dictates actions but ideas and sentiments” ([1886] 1994:21). In one form or another, this proposition appears in nearly every

introductory sociology and anthropology text on the market. But, it's wrong. Had chauvinism not made Durkheim contemptuous of all things English, he might have had second thoughts on reading Edward Tylor ([1871] 1958:446), who was careful to point out that only *some kinds* of religions have moral implications:

To some the statement may seem startling, yet the evidence seems to justify it, that the relation of morality to religion is one that only belongs in its rudiments, or not at all, to rudimentary civilization. The comparison of savage and civilized religions bring into view . . . a deep-lying contrast in their practical action on human life . . . the popular idea that the moral government of the universe is an essential tenet of natural religion simply falls to the ground. Savage animism [religion] is almost devoid of that ethical element which to the educated modern mind is the very mainspring of practical religion. Not, as I have said, that morality is absent from the life of the lower [cultures] . . . But these ethical laws stand on their own ground of tradition and public opinion, comparatively independent of the animistic beliefs and rites which exist beside them. The lower animism is not immoral, it is unmoral.

Tylor was correct. The proposition about the moral functions of religion requires a particular conception of supernatural beings as deeply concerned about the behavior of humans toward one another. Such a conception of the gods is found in many of the major world faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. But it appears to be largely lacking in the supernatural conceptions prevalent in much of Asia and in animism and folk religions generally.

It would seem to follow, therefore, that the moral behavior of individuals would be influenced by their religious commitments *only* in societies where the dominant religious organizations give clear and consistent expression to divine moral imperatives. Thus, for example, were proper survey data available, they should show that those who frequented the temples in Greco-Roman times were *no more* observant of the prevailing moral codes than were those who were lax in their religious practice. As Tyler pointed out, this is not to suggest that societies in antiquity lacked moral codes, but only that these were not predicated on religious foundations. It follows that the moral effectiveness of religions varies according to the moral engagement of their gods.

Unconscious divine essences are unable to issue commandments or make moral judgments. Thus, conceptions of the supernatural are irrelevant to the moral order unless they are *beings*—things having consciousness and desires. Put another way, only beings can desire moral conformity. Even that is not sufficient. Gods can lend sanctions to the moral order only if they are *concerned* about, informed about, and act on behalf of humans. Moreover, to promote virtue among humans, gods must be virtuous—they must *favor good* over evil. Finally, gods will be effective in sustaining moral precepts, the greater their *scope*—that is, the greater the diversity of their powers and the range of their influence. All-powerful, all-seeing gods ruling the entire universe are the ultimate deterrent.

Two conclusions follow from this discussion. First, the effects of religiousness on individual morality *are contingent on images of gods* as conscious, morally concerned beings; religiousness based on impersonal or amoral gods *will not influence* moral choices. Second, participation in religious rites and rituals will have little or no *independent* effect on morality.

Recently I published a study to test these conclusions, based on data for the United States and 33 other nations (Stark 2001b). The results were consistent and overwhelmingly supportive. In each of 27 nations within Christendom, the greater importance people placed on God, the less likely they were to approve of buying goods they knew to be stolen, of someone failing to report that they had accidentally damaged an auto in a parking lot, or of smoking marijuana. These three items were selected from a considerably larger set because only these three were condemned as immoral by the majority in all the nations in the study. The correlations between belief in God and morality were as high in Protestant as in Roman Catholic nations and where average levels of church attendance were high or low. Indeed, participation in Sunday services (a measure of ritual activity) was only weakly related to moral attitudes and these correlations disappeared or

became very small when the God “effects” were removed through regression analysis. That is, God matters; ritual doesn’t.

The findings are similar for Muslim nations, where the importance placed on Allah is very strongly correlated with morality, but mosque attendance is of no significance. In India, too, concern for the gods matters but temple attendance has no detectable effect on morality. But in Japan, where the gods are conceived of as many, small, and not particularly interested in human moral behavior, religion is irrelevant to moral outlooks—concern about the gods, visits to temples, prayer, and meditation all are without any moral effects. Nor are there God or temple effects on morality in China. However, in China prayer does matter, but in the wrong direction! That is, the more often they pray, the more tolerant the Chinese are of immorality. I suggest that this result is due to the fact that in China, “prayer” seldom implies a longstanding, deeply felt relationship with a God, but merely involves requests for favors from various divinities of small scope. As such, praying tends to reflect a quite self-centered and self-serving activity, consistent with rapidly shifting from one God to another on the basis of results, or even taking a stick to the statue of a God who fails (Chen 1995). Seen in this light, a question about prayer is likely to select those somewhat lacking in terms of a social conscience.

These results show that, in and of themselves, rites and rituals have little or no impact on the major effect universally attributed to religion—conformity to the moral order. Thus, it seems necessary to amend the “law” linking religion and morality as follows: *images of gods as conscious, powerful, morally concerned beings function to sustain the moral order.*

Clearly, Durkheim made a major error when he dismissed gods as a mere religious epiphenomena. Unfortunately, his error had severe, widespread, and long-lasting consequences, for it quickly became the “respectable” sociological view that religion consists of rites and ritual and that these exist only because their latent function is to integrate societies and to thereby lend sacred sanctions to the norms. In retrospect, it seems remarkable that such a notion gained such rapid acceptance and went unchallenged for so long. Stripped of its functionalist jargon, the basic argument seems to have been that since “we” know there are no gods, they can’t be the real object of religion—the truism that things are real to the extent that people define them as real failed to make any headway in this area of social science.

MARX

And finally, Marx. I suspect that few of you are much taken with Marx’s writing about religion; those who cherish these notions usually select a different area of specialization. Nevertheless, I think it useful to refute the single most significant thing Marx had to say about religion, a proposition that has been echoed through the generations by Marx’s disciples, and that has gained such credibility among our colleagues in other areas that it can’t be rooted out of the textbooks or from popular expression. When he wrote that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . the opium of the people” ([1844] 1964:42), Marx gave poetic expression to the sociological axiom that faith is rooted in want and misery and that piety is most prevalent among the poor. This eventually was enshrined as the “deprivation thesis” when Charles Y. Glock (1964) constructed a typology of deprivations and connected a modal religious response to each type, the sect being the religious response to “economic deprivation.”

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of data that dispute the claim that religiousness is rooted in poverty. With the advent of survey research, many investigators have found the lower classes to be conspicuously absent from the pews on Sunday mornings and from church membership rolls (Bultina 1949; Burchinal 1959; Cantril 1943; Demerath 1965; Dynes 1955; Lenski 1953; Stark 1964, 1971). This is true even among “evangelical” and “fundamentalist” Protestants—members of these groups are about as likely to have gone to college and to earn high incomes as are members of more liberal denominations as well as Roman Catholics, while the unchurched are the least educated and have the lowest incomes (Smith 1998; Roof and McKinney 1987). Even

very strict sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses include many people of privilege and enroll far fewer low-status people than their percentage in the population (Stark and Iannaccone 1997). This does not mean that the poor are *always* relatively outside of organized religion. The enormous growth of Pentecostal groups in Latin America does seem to mainly involve those of modest means (Chesnut 2003). But the larger point remains that religion is at least as often associated with privilege.

In an attempt to repair this shortcoming of the deprivation thesis, N. J. Demerath, III (1965) found that *within* denominations (among those who are official church members), lower-status persons were slightly more likely to hold a "sectlike orientation," that is, to hold more literal beliefs and to be more expressive in their religious actions. I subsequently confirmed and extended these results (Stark 1964, 1971). Even so, the demonstrated class effects on religious beliefs are very small within the churches and quite unreliable in general populations, while those linking privilege and religious participation are strong and dependable (Stark and Finke 2000). The most that can be said is that the empirical basis for the deprivation thesis is very meager, and amounts to little more than a very modest tendency for less educated people who are religiously active to be a bit less "sophisticated" in their religious outlook.

Of course, it can be argued that surveys are blunt instruments that fail to reveal the religious intensity that is fundamental to the deprivation thesis. What are mere attitudes and verbal agreement with conventional statements of faith compared with the stuff of *real* religious life? Hence, to discover the effects of deprivation it may be necessary to examine the eruption of sect movements and the appeal of asceticism.

As to the eruption of sects, Friedrich Engels claimed that Christianity began as "the religion of slaves, of poor people . . . of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome" (1894–1895:4) and Ernst Troeltsch ([1912] 1931) expanded that claim to assert that *all sect movements* are the product of the lower classes. Subsequently, H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) made the proletarian origins of sects the primary pivot in his famous "church-sect" theory.

Nevertheless, it's not so. For example, early Christianity was based primarily in the privileged, not the poor (Stark 1996). Nor was early Christianity unusual in this respect. With the exception of some Anabaptist groups (who were led by the privileged, but who appear to have been sustained mainly by the urban middle and lower classes), over the course of European history the major sect movements were very obviously based in persons of considerable wealth and power: the nobility, the clergy, and well-to-do urbanites (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992, 1998; Russell 1965; Stark 2003a, 2003b). For example, at the outbreak of the first French War of Religion in 1562, it is estimated that 50 percent of the French nobility had embraced Calvinism (Tracy 1999), but very few peasants or urban poor rallied to the Huguenots (Ladurie 1974). Indeed, it was not, as has been claimed, landless second sons and knights without property who sustained the early Crusades: it was the heads of great households—kings, counts, earls, and barons—who led the way at enormous personal cost (Riley-Smith 1997; Stark 2004).

Thus, the case that religiousness is rooted in deprivation is not supported by statistics on church attendance or membership and is not confirmed by participation in major sect movements or the Crusades. But what about *asceticism*? What about those who embrace lives of pious sacrifice and privation? Surely ascetics are not overrecruited from among the privileged. However, that is precisely what the data suggest. For example, of Buddha's first 60 converts, 55 came from "prominent families" and the other five may well have been from high-status origins as well (Lester 1993:867). In ancient Greece, according to both Plato and Euripides, the Orphics and the Pythagoreans, two extremely ascetic sects, drew virtually all their members from among the rich (Burkert 1985; James 1960). As for ancient Israel, it now is recognized that the Essenes "were not lower class dissidents," but were recruited from "the economic, social, and educational elite . . . who could afford the 'luxury' of indulgence in affairs of the spirit" (Baumgarten 1997:47). The same is true of the more ascetic members of the Cathars and the Waldensians (Costen 1997; Lambert 1992). Finally, in my study of 483 ascetic Catholic saints who lived between 500 and

1500, 75 percent were from the nobility and another 14 percent came from wealthy families (Stark 2003b).

What Marx probably should have said is that “religion often is the opium of the dissatisfied upper classes, the sigh of wealthy creatures depressed by empty materialism.” Such an observation might have offered useful guidance to those presently investigating the deep involvement of heirs to great American fortunes in spirituality groups such as Esalen and Naropa. But, Marx’s envy of the rich blinded him to any such possibility.

CONFUSING SCIENCE, SCRIPTURE, AND LITERATURE

The mode of scholarship preferred by social scientific ancestor worshippers is entirely appropriate when devoted to texts invested with authority or with literary value. As David Lyle Jeffrey explains so eloquently in his *Houses of the Interpreter: Reading Scripture, Reading Culture*, a special kind of analytical reading is needed by scholars of scripture or culture. As he put it, in describing how C. S. Lewis read, “reading deeply in tough and intellectually demanding writers is an essential practice for thoughtful Christians, and [Lewis] assumes that achievement of such careful and meditative reading will follow naturally from Christian dependence for spiritual authority upon venerable and authoritative texts—in particular, of course, on the Bible itself” (Jeffrey 2003:175).

Put another way, starting with the earliest Church fathers, theirs was an attempt to penetrate texts in pursuit of authoritative truth. Saint Augustine did not read scripture to see *if* it were true; he approached it as containing truths needing to be recognized and fully understood. What does God tell us in this passage? This question arose for Augustine, as for all theologians and millions of thoughtful Christians, because in many passages “diverse things may be understood under these words which yet are all true.” That is, scripture is authoritative and that makes it necessary, as Augustine expressed it, to “enquire [for example] what Moses, that excellent minister of Thy faith, would have his reader understand by those words . . . let us approach together unto the words of Thy book, and seek in them Thy meaning, through the meaning of Thy servant, by whose pen Thou hast dispensed them” (*Confessions* 12). This is the necessary and proper way to read any text deemed to be authoritative. Thus, it also is entirely appropriate for a student of literature to ask what did Shakespeare really mean to convey about pride in his characterization of Lady Macbeth? Presumably, there is truth lying in the text awaiting discovery because the text has intrinsic authority in that it reflects Shakespeare’s literary purposes. It may even be ventured that theologians and literary scholars often prize ambiguity and inconsistency in authoritative texts—indeed, many careers are built on such unclarity.

However, unclarity is an abomination in scientific texts. Generations of ancestor-worshipping exegesists to the contrary, to the extent that one must dig through Weber trying to discover what he really meant, he fails as a scientist. If there is doubt about what scientists mean, they might as well not have said anything. This is because the “authority” of science derives not from the *source* of any particular contribution, but from *performance*. That is, the “authority” of science is fully vested in empirical assessments. Light either bends in proportion to Einstein’s equations or it doesn’t; the value placed on the equations depends entirely on their continuing empirical confirmation, whether the equations were first formulated by Albert Einstein or by Francis Albert Sinatra. Hence, it is absolutely required that the equations clearly imply observable empirical events or situations. Imagine physicists responding to the disconfirmation of one of their leading theories by exploiting the ambiguity of its expression as an opportunity to claim that it was misunderstood and that, as properly understood, it really fits these particular outcomes. One can, of course, fill volumes with such evasions on behalf of Marxist, Weberian, or Durkheimian “theories.” But enough! Despite the fact that they were written in “foreign” languages, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, and *Das Kapital* are not scriptures and to become a true disciple of one of these all-too-human ancestors is a

pathetic confusion of scripture and science. This is in no way to assert the superior credibility of either scripture or science, but to recognize their fundamental differences. Indeed, the graceful compatibility of scripture and science is a product of the very different aspects of reality to which they are addressed. Which is why it is so ironic that those most antagonistic toward scripture are so prominent among those who treat the writings of a social scientific ancestor as having the authority of Holy Writ.

CONCLUSION

So, let me bring this exhortation to a close. Despite the prevalence of a social scientific form of Shinto, today we know a great deal more about religion than Weber, Durkheim, or Marx ever did. We did not achieve this by burning incense or leaving gifts at their graves, or by finding hidden meanings making their work immune from any disconfirmations. We did it by getting on with the job of social science. Let there be no more papers with titles such as “A Weberian Analysis of X,” “A Durkheimian Approach to Y,” or “A Marxist Interpretation of Z.” Such papers have all the relevance of “Factor Analysis as Anticipated in Deuteronomy.”

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