Sociology of Religion: A Resource for Theological Anthropology
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In *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), Peter Berger argued for a theology whose starting point is anthropological, and whose methods would reflect a very high empirical sensitivity. He gave “a few indications” of how one might begin the task of developing such a theology. One would seek out “signals of transcendence” within the empirically given human situation by identifying the “prototypical human gestures” that may constitute such signals. Among such gestures, he singled out the human propensity for *order, play, hope, damnation,* and *humor.*

Berger returned to his proposal for an empirically sensitive theology in *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), published exactly ten years after the publication of *A Rumor of Angels.* He reiterated his call for a theology whose starting point is anthropological and developed his “inductive” approach to theology more systematically, focusing on the relationship between religious experience and religious tradition. This inductive approach, which he identified with theological liberalism (Schleiermacher, with a significant dose of William James), is an alternative to the “deductive” approach of neo-orthodoxy (Barth), and the “reductive” approach of modern consciousness (Bultmann). Thus, *The Heretical Imperative* returns to the basic issues of theological method which were sketched out in *A Rumor of Angels,* and goes beyond the earlier book in developing a theological method which is both sensitive to the empirical and responsive to the transcendent. It does not, however, focus in any explicit way on the signals of transcendence developed in *A Rumor of Angels.* For the purposes of this essay, I want to use Berger’s “signals of transcendence” as a means of understanding recent developments in sociology of religion in light of theological anthropology.

It must be acknowledged that sociologists of religion have given very little explicit attention to theological anthropology. Books like *Sociology and Human Destiny,* edited by Gregory Baum (New York: Seabury, 1980), *Sociology and Theology: Alliance and Conflict,* edited by David Martin, John Orme Mills, and W. S. F. Pickering (New York: St. Martin’s, 1980), and Donald L. Miller’s *The Case for Liberal Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) are evidence that theological anthropology is still on the sociologists’ agenda. But it is fair to say that most sociolo-
especially his comparison of symbolic reductionism and symbolic realism (ch. 15), and The Broken Covenant (New York: Seabury, 1975), and Andrew M. Greeley’s The Mary Myth (New York: Seabury, 1977) are examples of sociologists assuming the role of theologians.

Still, the majority of sociologists of religion leave theological issues to one side. For the most part, they are not anti-theological; indeed, they have been most receptive to Berger’s theological agenda and Bellah’s tendency to interweave sociological analysis and prophetic admonition. In their own research, however, they tend to bracket out theological issues.

My objective in this essay is to show that, while research-oriented sociologists of religion have not addressed theological anthropology in any explicit way, their work nonetheless identifies prototypical human gestures that constitute signals of transcendence. In the following, my concern, first of all, is to identify the major areas of research over the past few years, and to cite significant publications in these areas. Then I shall turn to the issue of theological anthropology, via Berger’s signals of transcendence, and suggest in what ways this empirical research, while centered on human gestures, discloses the transcendent.

I. DENOMINATIONAL STUDIES

As one might expect, religious denominations continued to attract many sociologists of religion in the 1970s. The most influential book of the decade was Dean M. Kelley’s Why Conservative Churches Are Growing (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1972; 2nd ed., 1977). Few sociologists of religion were entirely happy with Kelley’s book, but it galvanized denominational research in much the same way that Harvey Cox’s The Secular City (New York: Macmillan, 1965) generated research on secularization in the 1960s. The response to Kelley’s book has not been a dismissal of his claim that conservative churches are growing at a faster rate than liberal churches, but a careful probing of his explanations for this growth. By far the most ambitious and authoritative response is Understanding Church Growth and Decline 1950-78, edited by Dean A. Hoge and David A. Roozen (New York: Pilgrim, 1979). The working assumption behind these studies is that church growth and decline involve a mixture of contextual and institutional factors, both national and local, an assumption also supported by Gary D. Bouma’s “The Real Reason One Conservative Church Grew,” Review of Religious Research 20 (1979) 127-37.

Books designed for a more popular audience and written from the standpoint of the liberal churches that were suffering membership losses, or growing very slowly, are Carl S. Dudley’s Where Have All Our People Gone (New York: Pilgrim, 1979), J. Russell Hale’s Who Are the Unchurched (Washington: Glenmary Research Center, 1977) and The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), Edward A. Rauff’s Why People Join the Church (New York: Pilgrim, 1979), and Jackson W. Carroll and Robert L. Wilson’s Too Many Pastors? The Clergy Job Market (New York: Pilgrim, 1980). A particularly interesting empirical study of two Presbyterian congregations, one liberal, the other charismatic, is Douglas B. McGaw’s A Tale of Two Congregations (Hartford: Hartford Seminary Foundation Research Reports, 1980). Like some of the studies in the Hoge and Roozen volume, this congregational analysis supports Kelley’s argument that “strong” churches grow faster than weak ones, but it does not support his view that “strictness” (i.e., doctrinal orthodoxy or theological exclusivism) is a positive factor in church growth.
Two recent books by Lutherans that are less concerned with the immediate issue of growth and decline, and more interested in how denominations are structured and how they interact with one another and the society in which they exist, are *American Denominational Organization: A Sociological View*, edited by Ross P. Scherer (South Pasadena: William Carey, 1980) and *Where the Spirit Leads: American Denominations Today*, edited by Martin E. Marty (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980). Scherer’s book advocates an open-systems model for understanding the denominational organization.

The denomination that continued to receive the most attention from sociologists of religion during the 1970s was the Mormon Church, one of the fastest growing conservative churches in America. It is currently the object of considerable interest among historians, as witnessed by the publication of Mark P. Leone’s *Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979) and Klaus J. Hansen’s *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981). Unfortunately, the numerous sociological studies dealing with “social control mechanisms” in the Mormon Church, some of which have been published in recent years in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Review of Religious Research*, have not been collected into a single volume. Nor has there been any serious attention given to a rather remarkable book, *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, edited by Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1978), in which a number of highly respected non-Mormon scholars (including Krister Stendahl, Ernst Betz, John Dillenberger, and Robert Bellah) discuss similarities between the beliefs and practices of Mormons and those of various traditional Jewish and Christian groups. (As I will indicate in a moment, respected scholars have also been receptive to the Unification Church’s invitation to participate in its various conferences and symposia.)

II. ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS

Denominational studies reflect the tensions that existed between conservative and liberal churches in the 1970s, and between conservatives and liberals within denominations. In addressing themselves to these tensions, sociologists were working on rather familiar turf, since studies comparing liberal and conservative forms of religiosity have long been a staple of American sociology of religion. A far more complicated issue for sociologists was the emergence of new religions in the 1960s. Not only were these groups more difficult to penetrate (a study by Thomas Robbins, Dick Anthony and Thomas E. Curtis, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12 [1973] 259-71, documents one such case), but also studying some of these groups has involved professional risk. A book that reflects the range of sociological interest in new or “alternative” religious groups is *The New Religious Consciousness*, edited by Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California, 1976).

The new religion that has attracted the most attention by far (and has entailed the greatest professional risks) is the Unification Church founded by Rev. Sun Myung Moon. Moon’s movement was first studied by John Lofland in *Doomsday Cult* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966; reissued, New York: Irvington, 1978). A very negative assessment of the movement is *Science, Sin, and Scholarship*, edited by Irving L. Horowitz (Cambridge: MIT, 1978). Most sociologists of religion have attempted to study the Unification Church in a more dispassionate fashion, largely by resisting the tendency reflected in such books as Ronald Enroth’s *The Lure of
the Cults (Chappaqua: Christian Herald, 1979) and A. James Rudin and Marcia R. Rudin’s Prison or Paradise? The New Religious Cults (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) to lump all new religions together, as though they are a single nefarious phenomenon. The most widely acclaimed sociological studies of the Unification Church are two books by David Bromley and Anson D. Shupe, Jr., “Moonies” in America: Cult, Church and Crusade (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979) and The New Vigilantes: Deprogrammers, Anti-cultists, and the New Religions (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980). In Gods We Trust, edited by Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981) contains excellent essays dealing with the theory that “Moonies” are the victims of brainwashing. But the single most significant volume on the Unification Church is The Social Impact of New Religious Movements, edited by the British sociologist of religion, Bryan Wilson (New York: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1981). Its significance is due, in part, to the fact that the essays in the volume were originally presented at a conference in Berkeley (1980) that was sponsored by the Unification Church, and that the book is published by the Unification Church press. One of the most seminal articles is by another British sociologist, Eileen Barker, entitled “Who’d Be a Moonie?” She concludes that the prospective convert to the Unification Church “is looking for someone to give him the chance to give, for someone to help him to help” (94).

Significantly, her conclusion is echoed in George Gallup, Jr., and Daniel Poling’s The Search for America’s Faith (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), Barbara Hargrove’s Religion for a Dislocated Generation (Valley Forge: Judson, 1980) and Merton P. Strommen’s The Five Cries of Youth (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). While not specifically concerned with converts to the Unification Church, each of these books suggests that today’s adolescents and young adults are seeking outlets for their altruistic desire to serve others. This might not seem a very startling discovery were it not for the fact that ours is also a narcissistic age, as Christopher Lasch has argued in Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged (New York: Basic Books, 1977) and The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Norton, 1979).

While technically not an “alternative religion,” since few see it as an alternative to denominational religion, “civil religion” was a major preoccupation of sociologists of religion in the 1970s. Robert N. Bellah stimulated interest in this Durkheimian notion with his article, “Civil Religion in America,” published in Daedalus (96 [1967] 1-21) and reprinted in Beyond Belief. He has elaborated on the civil religion thesis with the publication in 1975 of The Broken Covenant, subtitled “American Civil Religion in Time of Trial,” and in Varieties of Civil Religion, co-authored with Phillip E. Hammond (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). This thesis has stimulated an interest in public religion that has managed to survive the somewhat artificial impetus of the American bicentennial. John F. Wilson’s Public Religion in American Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1979) and Martin E. Marty’s The Public Church (New York: Crossroad, 1981) are cases in point.

Another “alternative religion” that is only now beginning to receive serious attention by sociologists of religion is the television “church” phenomenon. Thus far there have been two major studies of the influence of television on the shape of religion in America, Gregor T. Goethals’ The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar (Boston: Beacon, 1981), and Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann’s PrimeTime Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1981), but it is probably only a matter of time before more studies
will be published. Mention should also be made of another study of the impact of the media on religion, Roderick P. Hart, Kathleen J. Turner, and Ralph E. Knupp’s “Religion and the Rhetoric of the Mass Media” (*Review of Religious Research* 21 [1980] 256-75). This article shows that *Time* magazine’s reportage of religious news is shaped by rhetorical demands that favor action, conflict, and personality, and that these demands have become a fixed tradition.

A survey of resources on alternative religions would not be complete without reference to the Jonestown tragedy in November, 1978. This terrible event has been addressed in two major articles, one by John R. Hall entitled “The Apocalypse at Jonestown,” originally published in *Society* (1979) and reprinted in Robbins and Anthony’s *In Gods We Trust*, and the other by James T. Richardson entitled “People’s Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Critique and Comparison,” (*Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19 [1980] 239-55). Both had previously written books on communal groups. Hall’s *The Ways Out: Utopian Communal Groups in an Age of Babylon* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) was followed by Richardson’s *Organized Miracles: A Study of a Contemporary, Youth, Communal Fundamentalist Organization* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1979), which he coauthored with Mary W. Stewart and Robert B. Simmonds. The U. S. government’s release of tape recordings of the final mass meeting in Jonestown may stimulate further research, though it is also quite possible that sociologists, being human, will be as anxious as the general public to put this event behind them and focus on issues that entail less emotional involvement. Both Hall and Richardson interviewed family members of the victims.

III. RELIGION AND SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGE


Another research area that is developing by leaps and bounds is the study of religion in Islamic countries. Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) is the seminal book because it shows that the scholarly study of Islamic countries has been dominated by an “orientalist” perspective that, like the “noble savage” view of the native American Indian, is largely a figment of Western imagination. Books that are mainly post-orientalist are *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change*, edited by John L. Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1980), *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and Its Problems*, edited by Malcolm H. Kerr (Malibu: Undena, 1980), and *Woman in Contemporary Muslim Societies*, edited by Jane I. Smith (East Brunswick: Bucknell University, 1980).

Thus far sociologists of religion have been slow to study Latin America. Considering that
liberation theology not only originated in Latin America but also has a very high empirical sensitivity, this is most unfortunate. Daniel H. Levine’s *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Columbia* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1981) may be a harbinger of things to come.

Finally, William C. Fletcher’s *Soviet Believers: The Religious Sector of the Population* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1981) is doubly interesting because it makes the case that religious practice in Soviet Russia is far more extensive than Westerners imagine (45%, or 115 million Soviet citizens are religious), and bases this conclusion on research carried out by Soviet sociologists.

IV. THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

Evidence that conservative churches are growing and alternative religions continue to proliferate has led some sociologists of religion to claim that the secularization thesis which was immensely popular in the 1960s has been proven false. Anson D. Shupe, Jr., and David G. Bromley contend:

As sociologist Andrew Greeley observed in his recent book, *Unsecular Man* (1972), and as others have since reaffirmed, the 1970s have not witnessed the continuation of the secularization process projected by observers during the 1960s. On the contrary, the current decade has been one of widespread religious ferment (in Robbins and Anthony, *In Gods We Trust*, 247).

But is the secularization process dead? Was it that shortlived? Or were sociologists in the 1960s deluding themselves? If we mean by “secularization” the disappearance of religious institutions, then it is certainly misleading to say that we are in the midst of a secularization trend. But few of the major sociologists who were writing about secularization in the 1960s viewed it this way. In fact, this was the popular view of secularization which they were at pains to challenge.

The prevailing view of secularization among sociologists in the 1960s was based on the observation, first enunciated by Talcott Parsons, that modern society is highly differentiated. Berger pointed out in *A Rumor of Angels* that “Modern societies are, by their very nature, highly differentiated and segmented....The reasons for this, while complex, are not at all mysterious. They result from the degree of division of labor brought about by industrial forms of production, and from the patterns of settlement, social stratification, and communication engendered by industrialism” (53-54). Religion has been a major victim of this differentiation process because many of its traditional functions (particularly in the areas of politics, education, and health services) have been taken over by other institutions and agencies. In Berger’s view, an equally devastating effect of differentiation on religion has been its cognitive impact, the fact that religious ideas and meanings have influence in fewer areas of human life.

Andrew Greeley strongly rejected the “decline of religious institutions” theory in his book *Religion in the Year 2000* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), but he accepted the differentiation theory. He pointed out that “In earlier and more simple societies religion as a meaning system and religion as a social organization were only vaguely distinct from other
culture systems and social organizations,” but as society grew more elaborate and complex, “differentiated social institutions emerged which specialized in one or the other dimensions and refused to belong to the total conglomerate. Religion then became a specialized institution and a specialized meaning system distinct from and sometimes in conflict with other institutions and other value systems” (99). Thus Greeley accepted the differentiation theory, and Unsecular Man (New York: Schocken, 1972) indicates no change in that position. However, he takes a more positive view of differentiation than does Berger, contending that it has not meant a decrease in the influence of religion in society, though the examples he cites in support of this view relate more to the “belonging” than the “meaning” system of religion, and thus do not directly refute Berger’s contention that those who take religious ideas seriously have become a “cognitive minority,” both outside and inside the churches.

In Beyond Belief Bellah also accepted the differentiation thesis and, like Berger, was especially concerned with its cognitive effects. He noted, in particular, that religion and the sciences (including social sciences) have learned, for the most part, to coexist in a “non-antagonistic differentiation.” But, while acknowledging that non-antagonism is better than the earlier antagonism, he called on theologians and social scientists to work toward new integrations. He felt that the differentiation process had gone as far as it could, and that the time had come for a new trend toward reintegration. One sign that this was already happening is that

religion, instead of becoming increasingly peripheral and vestigial, is again moving into the center of our cultural preoccupations. This is happening both for purely intellectual reasons having to do with the re-emergence of the religious issue in the sciences of man and for practical historical reasons having to do with the increasing disillusionment with a world built on utilitarianism and science alone (246).

Greely returned to the differentiation issue in The Mary Myth, focusing on the problem of sexual differentiation. Here he deals more directly than in his earlier book with religious “meaning” systems. In Religion in the Year 2000 he predicted that one of the enduring issues confronting theologians in the years ahead is sexuality. In The Mary Myth he contends that one of the most difficult problems facing individuals and churches today is that of sexual differentiation, the fact

that “male” and “female” are two distinctive forms of human experience and consciousness. The experience of sexual differentiation is a “limit experience” in which we are confronted with the fact of our finitude (i.e., it forces us to recognize that our perception of the world is partial). But limit experiences may also be transformative; they have the power to give us “a hint, sometimes subtle, almost imperceptible, and at other times powerful, that there is ‘something else’ going on in our lives, and if there is, there may also be ‘something else’ beyond the horizon. Religion, necessarily and inevitably, is about that ‘something else’” (27). Greeley suggests that religious symbols capture the transforming power of such limit experiences, and that the Christian symbol of Mary is “the most dazzling symbol” of the transforming power of the limit experience of sexual differentiation. Mary symbolizes woman (and the feminine side of God) as the source of life, of spiritual renewal, of sexual passion, and the acceptance of death. Through this symbol our perceptions of the limitations imposed by sexual differentiation are restructured; we see the
limits of this differentiation in a wholly new way, and this perceptual restructuring (or “illumination”) leads us out of our discouragement, weariness and separateness to a new sense of hope, trust, freedom, and serenity.

Sociological discussion of differentiation and its impact on religion may not have the popular appeal of the “religion is disappearing” view, but this is the one version of the secularization theory on which most sociologists can agree, though they have drawn quite different conclusions regarding its effects on religion, and have proposed different strategies for dealing with it. An article that helps to sort out the different theories of secularization is Larry Shiner’s “The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research” (Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 6 [1967] 207-20) and reprinted in William Newman’s The Social Meanings of Religion (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1974). Evidence that secularization theory is clearly not a dead issue among sociologists of religion is Richard K. Fenn’s Toward a Theory of Secularization (Storrs: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Monograph Series, 1978).

V. SIGNALS OF TRANSCENDENCE

It is my contention that, as we look back on the past few years of theory and research in the sociology of religion, we are able to discern human gestures which constitute signals of transcendence. The studies of the denominations in the past decade reveal the human propensity for order. Conservative churches grew not so much because they were strict or dogmatic, but because they created an aura of strength, the sense that the church knows what it is doing and where it is going. Thus they capitalized on the human propensity for order, for assurance that everything is in order and as it should be.

Studies of religion in areas of socio-political change reveal the human disposition to hope, especially as reflected in gestures of courage in the face of suffering and death. Berger emphasizes that courage can be exhibited by individuals committed to every kind of cause—good, bad, or indifferent—and the cause is not justified by the courage of its proponents. Thus, the gestures of courage that are signals of transcendence are those that are linked to hopes for human creation, justice, or compassion. Studies of religion in Africa and the Middle East, not to mention the Soviet Union, testify to such personal and collective gestures of courage.

The Jonestown tragedy points to a different signal of transcendence, what Berger calls the “argument from damnation.” He writes in A Rumor of Angels:

There are certain deeds that cry out to heaven. These deeds are not only an outrage to our moral sense, they seem to violate a fundamental awareness of the constitution of our humanity. The imperative to save a child from murder, even at the cost of killing the putative murderer, appears to be curiously immune to relativizing analysis. It seems impossible to deny it even when, because of cowardice or calculation, it is not obeyed (82-83).

Kenneth Wooden emphasizes in The Children of Jonestown (New York: McGrawHill, 1981) that the Jonestown massacre was primarily an assault on children. While the political and psychological pressures that Jim Jones was under at the time have been documented, there is no escaping the fact that what took place in Guyana was a slaughter of over 600 innocent children.1

What of Berger’s other two signals of transcendence, play and humor? Berger suggests
that play suspends the reality of our “living towards” death, while humor enables us to momentarily transcend “the imprisonment of the human spirit” in the world. Concerning play, in a very telling criticism of sociological studies on the growth and decline of the churches, Richard K. Fenn, in a review article entitled “Recent Studies of Church Decline: The Eclipse of Ritual” (*Religious Studies Review* 8 [1982] 124-28) points out that none of these studies gives any attention to the role that worship plays in church growth or decline. With a few exceptions (such as Bellah’s essay on “The Dynamics of Worship” in *Beyond Belief* and Donald L. Miller’s *The Case for Liberal Christianity*), sociologists have neglected the issue of worship, the primary means that religion offers for suspending the reality of our living towards death. They have given even less attention to humor. But while it is tempting to accuse sociologists of being a humorless lot, the fault more likely lies with the differentiation process, with the fact that the traditional link between religion and humor has become extremely tenuous in modern society.

Finally, two areas of research, alternative religions—especially those attractive to the young—and secularization, point to human gestures which Berger’s signals of transcendence do not seem to cover. In my judgment, research on alternative religions has identified a human gesture that signals transcendence, namely *vocation*, the altruistic desire to serve God and others. The secularization issue identified an equally important signal of transcendence, the fact that we moderns continue to experience *perceptual restructurings* which enable us to see our finitude, and God’s transcendence, in new and unexpected ways.