

## **Elements of a New Paradigm**

### Critique of old paradigm

“Until recently there was very little science in the social scientific study of religion. As a child of the ‘Enlightenment,’ social science began with the conviction that religion was not only false but wicked and best gotten rid of as soon as possible” (Stark & Finke, p. 1)

E.g., “Comte coined the word ‘sociology’ to identify a new social science that would replace religion as the basis for making moral judgments” (p. 3).

Key assumptions (according to Stark & Finke): (1) religion is false and harmful, e.g., impedes rational thought, always serves interests of ruling elite; (2) religion is doomed; (3) religion was “epiphenomenon,” i.e., only a reflection of other societal phenomena; (4) religion is treated as a “fundamentally psychological,” not sociological.

“[W]hat distinguishes the scientific from the old atheistic approach to religion is fundamentally a matter of motives. As social scientists, our purpose should neither be to discredit religion nor to advance a religion of science. Rather, our fundamental quest is to apply social scientific tools to the relationship between human beings and what they experience as divine. Science may examine any aspect of that relationship except its authenticity” (p. 21).

### The new paradigm

As the sociology of religion grew as a field, beginning in the 1950s and 1960, research failed to support the claims of the old paradigm, e.g., religiosity is connected to better mental (and physical) health and religion often animates rebellions against the status quo.

A religious economy approach used by Starke & Finke draw attention to religion as involving “the interplay of supply and demand for valued products. Religious economies consist of a market of current and potential followers (demand), a set of organizations (suppliers) seeking to serve that market, and the religious doctrines and practices (products) offered by the various organizations.” (pp. 35-36).

From this viewpoint, competition (pluralism) is good for religion and religious monopolies are bad.

The new paradigm claims that people are rational—even regarding religion.

## **Rationality and the “Religious Mind” (Stark & Finke)**

Stark is one of the leading proponents of a rational-choice approach to religion. Much of his work applies this approach to historical questions like the rise of Christianity (*The Rise of Christianity* [1996], *Cities of God* [2006]), monotheism (*One True God* [2001], *For the Glory of God* [2003]), American religious history (*The Churching of America 1776-1992* [1992], *The Rise of Mormonism* [2005]), and the origins of world religions (*Discovering God* [2007]). He also co-authored with John Lofland a classic article on religious conversion “Becoming a World-Saver” (based on the Unification Church).

In this chapter of *Acts of Faith* (2000), Stark & Finke present data that supports the utility of assuming rational actors when studying religion.

- There is a positive relationship between religiosity and mental health.
- Contrary to reports that the Unification Church “brainwashed” members, most group newcomers did not join and joiners had good mental health and could talk about the benefits and costs of joining (as could Jehovah’s Witnesses and members of other high commitment groups).
- Mormon fertility can be explained by a cost-benefit analysis.
- Church members’ contributions are related to their evaluation of their church.
- A substantial share of university science faculty are religious.

“One not need be a religious person in order to grasp the underlying rationality of religious behavior, any more than one need be a criminal in order to impute rationality to many deviant acts (as the leading theories of crime and deviance do). In saying this, we do not suppose that religious behavior is the rational choice for every actor—which is why irreligiousness or at least religious indifference is rather common—nor do we propose that just any religious behavior justifies its cost. What we are saying is that religious behavior—do the degree that it occurs—is generally based on cost/benefit calculations and is therefore rational behavior in precisely the same sense that other human behavior is rational.

“From this perspective, the full theoretical resources of social science can be utilized to understand religion” (p. 56).