From the Chair: Greetings! I hope that your summer goes swimmingly. Of course, the joys of summer mean the coming of the ASA’s annual meeting, so herein you’ll find some details about the section’s sessions on religion in Montreal. This summer also brings the publication of a new book that’s sure to generate conversation. Christian Smith’s book Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters is the topic of an interview you’ll find in these pages. Finally, I’d like to thank some of the many people who offered up their time to help make the religion section run so well. More on these three items below.

In Montreal, we’ll have some terrific section sessions along with a robust set of roundtables.

- **Jeff Guhin** organized a session (co-sponsored with the Sociology of Culture section) on the question: “Is Religion Really Just Culture? Is Culture Really Just Religion?” Would you like to know the answer? Then show up to this session.

- There is much to be gained from more systematic comparison of religious phenomena across national boundaries. **Mark Chaves** organized a session on “Religion in Cross-National Perspective: Leveraging Comparisons.”

- There is a pronounced increase in interest in the “spiritual” as a distinct category from the “religious.” **Jaime Kucinskas** organized a session on “Spirituality and Religion.”

- Religion touches on many different facets of social inquiry. **Mark Killian** organized a set of ten roundtables on topics related to religious organizations, health, secularity, families and youth, identity, gender, theory, and more.

On page 3, you’ll find my interview with **Christian Smith** about his forthcoming book on religion. While Chris has written widely on religion, he’s never written as directly about the nature of religion itself. He discusses how he came to write the book, provides an overview of the argument, and offers some thoughts on the sociology of religion as a field of inquiry. There is of course much more on all these topics in the book itself.

It has been a pleasure to serve as the section’s chair this past year. Working with so many community-minded people has made my job much easier. **Omar McRoberts**, last year’s chair, was a generous source of counsel and spearheaded the nominations process. **Jen’nan Read** and **David Eagle**, both in their first years, have gotten up to speed quickly. Jen’nan provided a steady hand as secretary-treasurer and David assembled engaging newsletters. **Peter Ryan** continues to expertly maintain our web presence. Three committee chairs shepherded this year’s awards deliberations. **Tricia Bruce** chaired the book award committee (**Mark Mulder**, **Rachel Rinaldo**, **Buster Smith**), **Jessica Collett** chaired the article award committee (**Amy Adamczyk**, **Conrad Hackett**), and **Brian Starks** chaired the student paper award committee (**Becky Hsu** and **Brandon Martinez**). Many thanks to you all!

I look forward seeing many of you in Montreal.

**Brian Steensland**
**From the Newsletter Editor**

I want to thank Chris Smith for taking the time to talk about his new book. As always, Chris’s ideas are stirring the waters and pressing sociologists to think more carefully about how they approach religion.

Also a HUGE thank you to Brian Steensland for serving as Section Chair. I’ve enjoyed working with him; he’s done a great job pushing more substantive content into this newsletter. And a big welcome to Wendy Cadge as she takes over his duties. We also say hello to newly elected officers, chair-elect, Melissa Wilde from the University of Pennsylvania, and section officers Richard Flory (USC) and Rachel Rinaldo (University of Colorado).

Don’t forget to skim through the extensive list of publications of many of our members (pages 7 and 8). While I take no credit for the great work you are doing, I do accept responsibility for any errors and omissions in the newsletter.

If you have corrections or ideas for newsletter content, don’t hesitate to contact me.

David Eagle, PhD
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**In Memoriam**

Peter Berger, both a theologian and a sociologist, who was a towering intellect in our field, died on Tuesday, June 27th, 2017 at his home in Brookline, MA. He was 88 years old. Berger was Professor Emeritus of Religion, Sociology, and Theology at Boston University and the author of many influential books, including *The Sacred Canopy*, *A Rumor of Angels*, *The Desecularization of the World*, and *The Many Altars of Modernity*. The sociology of religion community will want to honor his many contributions, including a feature on his contribution to the sociology of religion in an upcoming newsletter.

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Interview with Christian Smith on Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters

Christian Smith, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology, is the Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, and the Director of the Global Religion Research Initiative (grri.nd.edu). He has a new theory book on religion. Brian Steensland interviewed him via email about the book, its argument, and its implications.

Brian: You’ve written about many facets of religion over the years: religion and social movements, American evangelicalism, religious formation among youth and emerging adults, and religion and generosity, among others. Your new book addresses the nature of religion itself more directly than any of these past projects. What led you to write the book?

Chris: A couple different factors converged to prompt me to write this book. One is a growing sense on my part that our field of sociology of religion is in certain ways adrift because of a lack of theoretically oriented debates and research programs. A lot of really good empirical work is being produced in our field, but much of it seems to me disconnected from larger theoretical developments and so in some sense not intellectually integrated. For the longest time, secularization theory provided a master theoretical frame for research. Then in the late-1980s and throughout the 1990s, the debates over religious economies and rational choice theory (whatever one thought of them as theories or paradigms) served to guide a lot of solid empirical investigation.

I view the 2001 Chaves and Gorski Annual Review chapter as having brought that era to a close. Since then I don’t see a larger theoretical program in our field that has generated a collective research endeavor. I know some of my colleagues may think that is fine. But I believe we ought to be working harder at theoretically driven research and a breadth of many empirical studies that contribute to the formation, critique of, and hopefully consolidation of more general theory. This book is an attempt to help prompt something like that to maybe happen.

A second factor was the publication of Martin Riesebrodt’s important 2010 book, The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion, and then Martin's untimely death in 2014. I was fortunate to have come across that book, but only because one of my colleagues, Mary Ellen Konieczny, was a former student of Martin’s and brought it to my attention. The first time I read it, nothing clicked, but with the second reading, all the lights went on. In my view, Martin in that book not only provided a most helpful definition of religion but also re-orient us to a general understanding of religion different from many common approaches and really makes sense of the centrality of religious practices. Along the way, he also deftly explains why the radical post-colonial and post-modern deconstructionists haven’t really nailed their key points, and so why we actually still do have a very objectively real subject of study in religion. Yet it seemed to me that Martin’s book and its very fruitful implications were not being adequately grasped and deployed in the

From the publisher:

Religion remains an important influence in the world today, yet the social sciences are still not adequately equipped to understand and explain it. This book builds on recent developments in science, theory, and philosophy to advance an innovative theory of religion that goes beyond the problematic theoretical paradigms of the past.

Drawing on the philosophy of critical realism and personalist social theory, Christian Smith answers key questions about the nature, powers, workings, appeal, and future of religion. He defines religion in a way that resolves myriad problems and ambiguities in past accounts, explains the kinds of causal influences religion exerts in the world, and examines the key cognitive process that makes religion possible. Smith explores why humans are religious in the first place—uniquely so as a species—and offers an account of secularization and religious innovation and persistence that breaks the logjam in which so many religion scholars have been stuck for so long.

Certain to stimulate debate and inspire promising new avenues of scholarship, Religion features a wealth of illustrations and examples that help to make its concepts accessible to readers. This superbly written book brings sound theoretical thinking to a perennially thorny subject, and a new vitality and focus to its study.
sociology of religion and, especially with his death, I feared the promise of the book would pass unrealized. My book starts with (and modifies a bit and then further develops) a fundamentally "Riesebrodtian" approach to religion, which I believe can help us a great deal in our field.

Third, in this book I bring critical realism, the philosophy of social science to which I am committed, to bear on the social scientific study of religion. Most of the work in our field is either vaguely neo-positivist or conducted in the interpretive, hermeneutics tradition. I am a critical realist, by contrast, and wish to spread critical realism in the social sciences. But a lot of existing critical realist writings remain abstractly theoretical. My book is all theory, but it at least "applies" critical realism to the study of a particular type of human social action, religion, in a way that spells out not only theoretical but also methodological and analytical implications. I hope it proves intellectually persuasive and practically helpful and so spreads the critical realist influence.

In short, my book on religion is an attempt to cheer on and advance so much of what I think is excellent and useful in Riesebrodt's under-appreciated book, The Promise of Salvation—yet re-configured and much developed within a decidedly critical realist framework (Martin was a straightforward Weberian)—in ways that I hope will help rejuvenate the sociology of religion theoretically and generate broader, more coherent, and more theoretically-driven empirical research programs of scholarship.

Brian: What is the main argument of the book? How would you describe your approach to religion vis-à-vis others?

Chris: Well, I somewhat just answered that above, and hesitate to try to elaborate much more here for fear of saying just enough to be dangerous but not enough to make sense. But I suppose I can offer this.

A key point is that we really must and actually can get our definition of religion stated properly and helpfully. I think we can move beyond the decades of old, seemingly interminable debates about religion's definitions, and the associated frustrations and despair, and actually get somewhere very helpful. This, I think, is one of Martin Riesebrodt's key contributions. Having done that, we can then conceptualize religion in a practice-centered way, yet one that still takes religious beliefs and experiences seriously, though not centrally. That then puts us in the position to separate conceptually (what critical realists will want to call) religion's ontology from its causal powers, distinguishing what religion is from what it can do. That then, I hope my book shows, better helps us to think systematically about what causal capacities religion possesses to exert change or stability in the social world and how and why and under what kinds of conditions those causal powers operate. I make an argument about "causal attribution" as the pivotal cognitive process involved in religious life. These are fundamental questions for our field that are too often ignored or addressed piece-meal. From there I make an argument about why human beings are religious in the first place that I think feeds back into empirically relevant theorizing. Along the way I seek to show why and how all of the parties who have for many decades argued variously both for and against secularization theory are actually all both wrong and right, in different respects. If I am correct, then we need to take a basically different orientation toward that whole issue than has been standard in the past.

Finally, in terms of situating my approach in the larger field, it is fair to say this—I hope cryptic enough to intrigue but not to generate premature judgments. My theory is decidedly not rational choice; yet it shares with rational choice (and Weberian) theory a fairly strong sense of the purposeful intentionality of human action. My theory is decidedly not positivist; yet it shares with positivism a commitment to explanation centered on understanding the causes of outcomes and conditions and patterns. My theory is decidedly not post-modernist; yet it shares with post-modern sensibilities an appreciation for the socially constituted and power-laden character of social life, including religion, and the conceptually mediated and therefore historically and culturally located condition of human knowledge. My theory is not merely a version of sociological neo-pragmatism, insofar as I operate with greater confidence and ambition in our ability to formulate fallible but nonetheless truthful theoretical knowledge about how our social world is objectively structured and operates causally. My theory is friendly to culturalist and hermeneutics-oriented approaches to sociology, but goes beyond (at least some versions of) them in understanding meaning-constituted reasons as causally powerful, and the task of sociology as explaining things causally and formulating general theoretical accounts of the causal operations of reality. Which is to say, my theory is critical realist, in insisting that we hold together ontological realism, epistemic perspectivalism, and judgmental rationality simultaneously. And to see how that all unpacks for the study of religion, one will have to read the book itself.
Brian: Your practice-oriented definition of religion appears to move away from views of religion, like Durkheim’s, that center on shared morality and social integration. Could you elaborate on this difference? For instance, does your approach reflect a perspective on religion as it operates in a pluralistic and individualistic age? Or do you think an approach to religion that focuses on social integration has been ill advised from the outset?

Chris: I have always believed that functional definitions of religion are a mistake. They confuse what religion is with what religion has the causal capacity to do. We need to conceptualize religion’s ontology as one thing, and then empirically investigate what religion can and does causally do in the world as something else. Otherwise, we are definitionally unable to see all the ways that, in terms of your question, religion is not about shared morality and social integration. Functional definitions also notoriously include in "religion" a host of things that are obviously not religious, which is a fatal problem. I also think that following Durkheim in defining religion as concerning the "sacred" is a wrong move that leads to conceptual muddles.

Of course, studying the many aspects of social life that humans treat as sacred, both religious and not religious, is extremely important and fascinating. I have actually written a short book about sociology itself as a sacred project. The same is true of the study of moral order and solidarity. But defining religion in terms of the sacred creates more problems than it solves. We need to and we can formulate a fully satisfactory substantive definition of religion. But doing so requires something like the critical realist distinctions between ontology and capacity, being and doing, what things are versus what things are able causally to make happen in the world by virtue of what they are.

Brian: Your book includes some extensive reflections on the future of religion. For this forum, can you offer some thoughts about the future of the sociology of religion? What are some implications for empirical research that would flow from your approach? And can you connect those lines of research to the critical realist framework that underpins your perspective?

Chris: First, just to say, I think we in sociology of religion produce a lot of really good work; I admire tons of my colleagues' scholarship, and could never have written this theory book without so much of it to work with. But I do think there are a variety of things we can still do to improve our field, not all of which have to do with critical realism. Topically, we are too focused on U.S. religion and Christianity in particular, as people like David Smilde, Wendy Cadge, Courtney Bender, and others have been saying. We need to be out in the field all around the world and take a much more global and multi-religious approach, which is something I for my little part am now trying to promote with my Global Religion Research Initiative.

Analytically, I think we should be working much harder and more systematically in both qualitative and quantitative work on naming, conceptualizing, describing, and empirically studying the causal mechanisms by which religions have (or don't have) influences in lives and the world; as well as the complex contexts, interactions, and patterns that shape and emerge from the operation of causal mechanisms. Along those lines, I would love to see whole new generations of fantastic ethnographies of religion produced, as I think really good ethnography is perhaps best suited to accomplishing much of the above in single, penetrating, exciting, and teachable books.

Theoretically, I also believe we need to work at more connected and cumulative knowledge about religions, trying to consolidate and expand generalized theoretical knowledge; less functioning as a bunch of independent operators each doing our own thing with very little cumulative synthesis going on in the end. If we could accomplish the above, I think we would much improve our contribution to the scholarly understanding of religions more broadly, and hence to the world. Of course I hope my new book helps prompt even modest movements in these directions.
New Books By Section Members


This book exposes how American evangelicalism is having a profound impact on the religious lives of contemporary Christian immigrants, and the pressures immigrant churches face to incorporate evangelical worship styles, often at the expense of maintaining their ethnic character and support systems. Most interestingly, it shows that the integration patterns of post-1965 Christian immigrants and their descendants have essentially reversed earlier models. While immigrants from Europe and their children to the U.S. were expected to shed their ethnic identities to become Americans, in the sphere of religion, they could maintain their ethnic traditions within American denominations. This book shows that members of the contemporary second generation are incorporating into U.S. society by maintaining their ethnic identities in secular contexts, but are adopting a de-ethnicized religious identity and practice. In particular, many are gravitating toward evangelical megachurches.

Drawing on multi-site research in the U.S. and India this book also provides a global perspective on religion by demonstrating the variety of ways that transnational processes affect religious organizations and the lives of members, and how forces of globalization, from the period of colonialism to contemporary out-migration, have brought tremendous changes among Christian communities in the Global South. Amazon.


For decades, the Christian Right’s high-profile clashes with science have made national headlines. From attempts to insert intelligent design creationism into public schools to climate change denial, efforts to “cure” gay people through conversion therapy, and opposition to stem cell research, the Christian Right has battled against science. How did this hostility begin and, more importantly, why has it endured?

Antony Alumkal provides a comprehensive background on the war on science—how it developed and why it will continue to endure. Drawing upon Richard Hofstadter’s influential 1965 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Antony Alumkal argues that the Christian Right adopts a similar paranoid style in their approach to science. Alumkal demonstrates that Christian Right leaders see conspiracies within the scientific establishment, with scientists not only peddling fraudulent information, but actively concealing their true motives from the American public and threatening to destroy the moral foundation of society. By rejecting science, Christian Right leaders create their own alternative reality, one that does not challenge their literal reading of the Bible.

While Alumkal recognizes the many evangelicals who oppose the Christian Right’s agenda, he also highlights the consequences of the war on reality—both for the evangelical community and the broader American public. A compelling glimpse into the heart of the Christian Right’s anti-science agenda, Paranoid Science is a must-read for those who hope to understand the Christian Right’s battle against science, and for the scientists and educators who wish to stop it. Amazon.


To many mainstream-media saturated Americans, the terms “progressive” and “religious” may not seem to go hand-in-hand. As religion is usually tied to conservatism, an important way in which religion and politics intersect is being overlooked.
Religion and Progressive Activism focuses on this significant intersection, revealing that progressive religious activists are a driving force in American public life, involved in almost every political issue or area of public concern.

This volume brings together leading experts who dissect and analyze the inner worlds and public strategies of progressive religious activists from the local to the transnational level. It provides insight into documented trends, reviews overlooked case studies, and assesses the varied ways in which progressive religion forces us to deconstruct common political binaries such as right/left and progress/tradition.

In a coherent and accessible way, this book engages and rethinks long accepted theories of religion, of social movements, and of the role of faith in democratic politics and civic life. Moreover, by challenging common perceptions of religiously motivated activism, it offers a more grounded and nuanced understanding of religion and the American political landscape. Amazon.

New Articles and Book Chapters Featuring Section Members


ASA Presentations by Section Members


Alex DiBranco will present in the ASA panel for the Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements: Leadership, Strategy, and Organization in Social Movements, on "The New Right Movement: Leadership and Strategy." His presentation will discuss conservative Catholic and Protestant New Right leaders including Paul Weyrich, Phyllis Schlafly, and Jerry Falwell.

Member News and Notes

Elaine Howard Ecklund and co-PI Denise Daniels received a $1.5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc. for a study entitled, “Faith at Work: An Empirical Study.” See more here.

Wendy Cadge has two new grants, a $275,000 grant from the Henry Luce foundation for a study entitled “Assessing & Reimaging Chaplaincy Education – The Case of Healthcare” (see here for more info). The second is a three and a half year study of religion in the multi-ethnic context of ships and ports. It begins June 2017 and is funded by the Economic...
& Social Research Council in the UK. It is a collaborative project with Helen Sampson, Nelson Turgo, Sophie Gillat-Ray (all at Cardiff University) and Graeme Smith (University of Chichester). It is being led by Helen Sampson at the Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff University.

**David Eagle** received a $5,000 Jack Shand Research Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion to conduct a baseline study of clergy health in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

**Katherine Comeau** received a Fulbright to conduct her dissertation research. The award will provide 9 months of research and data collection in Jamaica. Her project explores how religious organizations draw on religious ideas of what constitutes "help" and how that translates in the international context. I will be affiliated with the University of West Indies in Mona.

**Rachel Ellis** defender her dissertation, "In this Place Called Prison: How Religion Structures the Social World of Incarcerated Women" at the University of Pennsylvania, Department of Sociology. The dissertation was advised by Melissa Wilde (chair), Randall Collins, and Annette Lareau. And even better, she will begin as an Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis this fall. Congratulations!

**Samuel Richardson** successfully defended his dissertation entitled, "The Generational Transmission of Jewish Values in Small Communities: The Utility and Magic of Thinking Small" at the University of Virginia. Congratulations! His research is also described at: smalljewishcommunities.org.