

The New Sociology of Religion

Subjects: Sociology

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The new sociology of religion differs from the classical and mainstream sociology, which was in force until the end of the last century, in that it no longer considers religion only as an independent variable, but places it together with other dependent variables, so that it becomes possible to investigate new themes, especially those that do not consider religious involvement—from atheism to the phenomenon of 'nones' (non-believers and non-practicing), from spirituality to forms of para-religions and quasi-religions and the varied set of multiple religions.

Keywords: sociology ; religion ; secularization

After the start given by the classical authors (in particular Durkheim and Weber, but also Simmel and W. James) to the scientific approach aimed at the knowledge of the religious fact, subsequent scholars have ventured, firstly, into the examination of religious practice (in the 1950s and 1960s) and then into the vexata quaestio of secularisation ^{[1][2]}, a topic that has held sway for several decades, until the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium (the peak of interest was recorded between the second part of the sixties and the first part of the seventies). Subsequently, but particularly since the 1980s, the discourse on the post-secular or post-secularisation has developed ^{[3][4][5]}. Thus, albeit by way of contrast, the topic of secularisation has remained central even in the new millennium ^[6]. In the meantime, however, other research has been conducted on entirely new (or almost new) topics: prayer ^[7], spirituality ^{[8][9]}, Eastern religions ^[10] and Chinese religions in particular ^{[11][12][13][14]}, everyday ^[15] and/or lived religion ^[16], digital religion ^{[17][18][19]}, gender ^[20], visual analysis ^{[21][22]}, the phenomenon of megachurches ^{[23][24][25][26]}, televangelism ^[27], Protestantism ^[28], atheism ^{[29][30]} ^[31] and so-called nones ^{[32][33]}. Finally, in some cases, there has been a slide (understood as a fact and certainly not as an evaluation) towards para-religious or quasi-religious aspects, like in studies on Scientology ^{[34][35]}, UFOs ^[36] or Pastafarians ^[37] (pp. 132–140) ^[38]. These contents were previously absent or poorly considered and are now visibly emerging, occupying the spaces of the most important journals, dedicated encyclopaedias and series. If the beginnings were characterised by a rather confessional propensity (for example, what is now the journal *Sociology of Religion* was called *American Catholic Sociological Review* from 1940 to 1963 and *Sociological Analysis* from 1964 to 1992), then gradually religious sociology became sociology of religion and ultimately of religions. In this regard, the diachronic dynamics of the original *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse* (1948), which then became the *Conférence Internationale de Sociologie des Religions* (1981), and finally the *Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions* (1989), is exemplary.

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