

RELIGION IN ITS SOCIAL SETTING

Glenn M. Vernon

The Sociology of Religion. By Thomas F. O'Dea. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966. 120 pp. \$8.95.

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The Mormon who reads a text on the sociology of religion such as this one by Thomas F. O'Dea of Columbia University, formerly of the University of Utah, will better appreciate the book if he understands that the purpose of sociological analysis of religion is to obtain sociological information not religious answers. While such a study may be of interest to the religious believer, the sociologist is concerned with the *social* or the *human* aspects of religion, whereas the religionist is concerned with the supernatural aspects. The sociologist examines man-man relationships, whereas the religionist is more involved with man-God relationships. The sociologist studies the *beliefs* which people have about what is moral, and how these beliefs are related to behavior, and is not concerned, as a scientific sociologist, with whether any moral standards are right or wrong. His scientific method of inquiry cannot provide such answers. Accustomed as religious people are to look for a moral dimension, they may not at first understand how behavior can be studied in an amoral or ethically neutral manner, and some would even question whether this can be done. It can.

When the chemist experiments in his laboratory, he does not ask if the resulting chemical combinations are beautiful or moral. He seeks answers of another type. The scientific sociologist studies religious behavior in the same way, restricting his attention to the observable, empirical aspects. He recognizes, of course (as does the chemist), that answers to the questions about beauty and morality can be secured, but by a method different from the one he uses, and he does not mix his methods when he functions as a scientist — at least not if he wants to call his answers “scientific.” If they restrict themselves to the scientific method of study, sociologists reach essentially the same conclusions about religious behavior whatever their personal faith.

People who look primarily for faith-promoting material or the message that religion is good for man will be disappointed in this book, which has another purpose — to help one understand, among other things, why individuals desire to read faith-promoting stories, or why they wish to be told that religion is good for man. However, those who desire to understand the exceedingly complex social factors which impinge upon religious groups, and to which religious leaders from the Church President to the local Elders Quorum President are constantly giving consideration (although not always in sociological terms or from a sociological perspective) will derive stimulating insights from this volume.

The book is not concerned with any particular religious group. Mormons are considered only infrequently. There is little *direct* relationship between this book and O'Dea's earlier book, *The Mormons*. But his conclusions can be related to the Mormon Church.

Among the findings from current sociology of religion which O'Dea

presents is the principle that religious behavior with a supernatural orientation has also natural or social consequences. Whether or not religious beliefs and rituals are true by some religious criteria, they have identifiable social effects which may extend far beyond the perceived religious goals, and of which the participants may be unaware. It may come as a surprise to some to find that the religion to which one belongs is related to such things as the likelihood that he will have a heart attack, vote Republican, or engage in certain types of sexual behavior.

A functional analysis, as sociologists term O'Dea's approach, emphasizes that religion is involved in the maintenance of the society as a functioning entity, although every particular religious group may not be equally involved. Some religious groups may, in fact, serve more to tear a society apart than to solidify it, but they are, nonetheless, always related to other institutions such as the economy, education, politics and the family. Religious behavior and beliefs, even those about supernatural phenomena, are influenced by the social setting, and consequently a particular religious group cannot function equally well in all societies. It is no surprise to the sociologist, for instance, to find that Mormon doctrines endorse the American type of government and economic system. No religious group can grow very much unless it supports the major social aspects of its society. The conflict between the early Mormons and the larger society over the practice of polygyny underscores the importance of the interrelationships and the process of establishing harmonious patterns.

O'Dea's discussion of the "institutionalization of religion" illuminates Mormon Church history as well as that of religious groups generally. The Latter-day Saints have gone through a transition from "cult" to "established sect" and may be continuing toward "denominational status," terms which have a specific sociological definition. From the time of Joseph Smith to that of David O. McKay, the Church has changed from a small loosely organized group with a charismatic prophet-type leader to an efficient religious bureaucracy which serves a world-wide membership of over two million. Joseph Smith was an innovator, a creative agent of change. Today an elaborate social structure with different administrative procedures and techniques is concerned less with creativity and innovation as far as "gospel truths" are concerned than with protecting the established "truths" from change, while, it might be added, at the same time endorsing a belief in eternal progress or change.

Tremendous changes have occurred since Mormons were driven from Nauvoo. Today church leaders and members serve on the boards of directors of large secular corporations, Mormons are selected for the Cabinet, and a Mormon is seriously considered as a presidential candidate. Sociological analysis provides insights into the changes within the religious group and within the society which are involved in such a transition.

An important section of the book is devoted to a discussion of some of the dilemmas faced by religious groups. This section will be meaningful to those who have wondered if being called to the office of Bishop automatically makes one an effective marriage counselor or to those who have tried to reconcile statements by Church leaders that a working mother encourages delinquency in her children with statements by behavioral scientists that a mother's working outside the home is unrelated to delinquency. Whatever supernatural forces may be involved in religious behavior, religion involves human beings finding solutions to dilemmas such as these.