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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Barker, Eileen (2003) And the wisdom to know the difference? Freedom, control and the sociology of religion (Association for the Sociology of Religion 2002 presidential address). [Sociology of religion](#), 64 (3). pp. 285-307. ISSN 1069-4404

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2013

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## **And the Wisdom to Know the Difference?**

### **Freedom, Control and the Sociology of Religion**

Eileen Barker\*

*London School of Economics*

\*Direct correspondence to Eileen Barker, London School of Economics, Houghton St,  
London WC2A 2AE, England

*This is a theoretical essay, but it is grounded in the empirical observations of the sociology of religion; and it has a political twist to it. The main thrust of the argument rests on the assumption that freedom is a socially relative concept, and, as such, not only can it be both increased and decreased according to circumstances, it can also be increased or decreased through a knowledge or ignorance of such circumstances. Questions are asked about the ability of individuals to choose their own religion, some of the potential consequences of their choices, and ways in which the state apparatus can regulate religious groups. The not-so-hidden agenda is that social scientists might further contribute to our freedom through an increased understanding of those things that we cannot change, and of how best to change those things we can – and, perhaps, of our capacity to know the difference.*

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot  
change, the Courage to change those things I can, and the

Wisdom to know the difference. (Reinhold Niebuhr 1892-1971)

The sociology of religion has long been concerned with issues of freedom and control. At an ontological and somewhat speculative level, there have been numerous treatises on whether it is the lot of individual participants in a society to be active actors ruling their own destinies or merely passive recipients subject to the vagaries of social forces. More empirically, the concern has been evidenced by work at individual, group and societal levels on, respectively, subjects such as brainwashing, mind control and/or mental manipulation; types of authority wielded by religious leaders and institutions; and/or the regulation and control of religions by states. Some of us have been particularly concerned with recent developments in post-communist countries, and that is the subject on which I chose to concentrate when selecting the contributors for this special edition of the journal.

We have, however, still a long way to go in understanding the processes that broaden and narrow our ability to determine (in both senses) the patterns of our lives. With one or two notable exceptions, our work has tended to focus on static situations and has been restricted to a series of particular, discrete circumstances. We have, for example, confined our findings to statements such as:

In situation A (when, say, a small religious group is in a closed environment, cut off from the rest of society) freedom and/or control has tended to be advanced or curtailed according to some unspecified, non-comparative scale.

Or:

In situation B (when, say, there is a strong relationship between the state and one traditional religion) the freedom and/or control of co-existing minority religions has tended to be diminished according to another unspecified and non-comparative scale.

Such conclusions do, of course, provide us with important and useful information. There does, none the less, seem to be a paucity of empirical studies that embrace a wider frame of reference. That is, there is relatively little work that, systematically,

(a) compares types and degrees of freedoms between, say, the Amish, Roman Catholics, Buddhists and Unificationists – let alone the Amish in nineteenth century Canada; the Catholics in fifteenth century Italy; Buddhists in seventeenth century Thailand, and Unificationists in twenty-first century Japan.

(b) examines the dynamics of a process in which A moves to B and then progresses to C – when, for example, freedom is decreased through an increase in the number and application of regulations, but this results in a reaction that overthrows the regulating authority, thus resulting in (perhaps) greater freedom.

(c) explores the complexities of situations in which one person's or group's liberty depends on curbing the liberty of other persons or groups.

(d) pursues the empirical relationships involved in the philosophically familiar distinction between “freedom from” and “freedom to”.

## **THE PARAMETERS OF FREEDOM**

### *Fatalism, Brainwashing and Total Freedom*

There are numerous ways in which we can conceive of, and ask questions about, freedom and control. These are, of course, concepts that lie at the very heart of the sociological

enterprise. Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Mead might have started from different assumptions – and they certainly came up with different answers – but they were all concerned with the ways in which individuals and groups are, variously, enabled and restrained by the structures and cultures within which they find themselves, and how they create, conserve, change and negotiate those structures and cultures.

For even longer, the concepts of freedom and determinism have lain at the root of the philosophical enterprise. They have been variously associated with further concepts such as causation and control; chance and choice; chaos and confusion, the first of each pair being usually, but not necessarily, taken to apply to an objective state, while the second refers more to subjective states involving human agency. Sometimes Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is invoked to explain how we can have choice: as not everything is determined, the argument goes, we are free to make decisions. In fact, if there were no regularities beyond the sub-atomic levels of organisation that Heisenberg was talking about, there would be nothing but chance occurrences,<sup>1</sup> leading to chaos.<sup>2</sup> Our ability to control our lives depends on our perceiving causes (that X leads to Y);<sup>3</sup> if there were no patterns of behaviour at the social level, there would be confusion rather than choice.

One rather irritating perspective is the unadulterated tautology of fatalism, which, *a priori*, rules out the possibility of freedom. Everything we do, the argument goes, is determined in

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we say something happened by chance because we don't *know* why it happened – or it was not *planned*. This is a different, “softer” kind of chance than what might be an ontological chance – something that happened without any cause and/or for no reason whatsoever.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that some kind of chaos does not exist at higher levels of organisation, but it is still debated whether this is an ontological or an epistemological state of affairs – whether the thunderstorm is *fundamentally* chaotic; or whether we just do not (and probably never can) *know* enough about the consequences of that butterfly flapping its wings because of the enormous complexity of the connections between the causes. Is, we can ask, the Butterfly Effect “order *masquerading* as randomness”? (Gleick 1988:22)

<sup>3</sup> Some would doubtless prefer concepts such as “correlation” or “constant conjunction” to that of “cause” (Hume 1965:90) – and perhaps they are right, but I do not believe that it is necessary to pursue the status of causation for our present purposes.

one way or another – as is our belief that we are free to make our own choices.<sup>4</sup> This may, of course, be true. But if it is, it is also true that most of us are “determined” to muse on and even to investigate what we consider to be something that it makes some sort of sense to call freedom.

Approaching the question from a very different philosophical perspective, that of ethics and moral philosophy, we meet a contrary position. The very idea that it makes sense to talk about morality (about performing a right action rather than a wrong action and/or being a good person rather than a bad person) presupposes that an individual not only has the option of choosing between at least two alternatives, but also that s/he is responsible for that choice. In other words, *the very concept of morality assumes that we are free to restrict our freedoms ourselves*; we consider that we and others ought not to perform certain actions that it is perfectly possible for us to perform. To put the argument slightly differently, some kind of criterion is needed to distinguish moral from immoral behaviour (“oughts” from “ought nots) *within* the realm of those potential actions that have not already been ruled out of court by other constraints – and as morality involves a denial of the legitimacy of some of those acts that we *could* perform, it follows that a moral decision involves a reduction of our freedom of action – and this is a decision that often rests on criteria supplied by religion.

Sometimes metaphors are used to portray different images of freedom and control. One that I quite like is to see ourselves as walking along a valley which has mountains on either side, and which becomes bifurcated by other mountains, thereby creating alternative valleys along which we might proceed. Sometimes the valleys are wide, and sometimes they are narrow; sometimes the mountains are steep and impenetrable, and sometimes they have

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<sup>4</sup> In some ways this is similar to the assumption underlying the behaviourism of J. B. Watson (1913) and B. F. Skinner (1972), but at least their social psychology encouraged us to look for the relationships between stimuli and responses, and the intricacies of operant conditioning.

gentle slopes; sometimes we can climb and expand the contours of the path, even climb to the top and look into the next valley; but eventually we encounter mountains that we cannot climb. There are always limits to our freedom – sometimes these limits are more and sometimes they are less than we are aware of.

Brainwashing is another kind of metaphor, but one that is frequently drawn upon not as an image but as an explanation. It rests on an assumption that the beliefs and/or behaviour of certain individuals are the result of their having had their freedom removed.<sup>5</sup> One category of individuals still popularly considered to be the victims of brainwashing is that of converts to the so-called “cults”, who, it is claimed, have been turned into mindless robots, unable to think or make any choices for themselves. However, during thirty-plus years of studying new religions and talking to thousands, if not tens of thousands, of the movements’ members, I have yet to meet a fully automated robot. I have, rather, become convinced that the overwhelming majority of those who resort to the metaphor of brainwashing are more likely to be motivated by their incomprehension or downright distaste of the *content* of the alternative belief system than by their comprehension of the actual *process* of conversion to it.

This conviction arises from research I began in the mid 1970s, when accusations of brainwashing were at their height and being used to justify deprogramming – the illegal practice of kidnapping members of new religious movements (NRMs) and holding them against their will until they escaped or renounced their faith. My interest in the subject was motivated as a citizen concerned about freedom as well as by the challenge presented to me as a sociologist concerned about the relationship between the individual and the social group. What I was initially unsure about was whether a restriction of the individuals’

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<sup>5</sup> It may be noted that this position is in no way similar to fatalism or behaviourism. In some ways it is quite the opposite as it assumes that we are all “naturally” free, but the freedom of choice that the convert previously enjoyed has been lost.

freedom would be greater as a consequence of a process of brainwashing or of deprogramming. If the Unificationists were really using brainwashing or mind control techniques, then surely this ought to be properly investigated so that something could be done to prevent such a blatant removal of people's freedom of choice – there might then even be an argument for “de-programming”. But if this were the case, then the practice should be conducted by properly trained people rather than those who were at the time violently depriving the converts of their freedom in the name of liberating them – often with harmful consequences.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with the challenge of going beyond circular *a priori* assumptions that converts (or “recruits”) were *either free or coerced* when they joined a movement such as the Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church,<sup>7</sup> I decided that, while distinguishing between freedom and determinism involved two concepts that appeared well nigh impossible to operationalise, it might be possible to operationalise the concept of choice, at least for the purposes of this particular study insofar as it focussed on processes happening in a clearly defined situation over a limited period of time.

A choice would involve reflection (in the present), memory (of the past) and imagination (of possible futures). A person would be an active agent in deciding between two or more possible options when [s]he could anticipate their potential existence, and when, in doing so, [s]he drew on his[her] previous experience and his[her] previously formed values and interests to guide his[her] judgement (Barker 1984:137).

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<sup>6</sup> See Patrick (1976) for a deprogrammer's own description of the violent methods used in his work to “free” his clients' adult children. It should be added that the more voluntary practices of “exit counselling” and “thought reform counselling” have now almost entirely replaced deprogramming in the West (Giambalvo 1992), though deprogramming involving physical restraint continues in Japan.

<sup>7</sup> Now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification.



The social situation in question arose when potential members, who had already become persuaded that the Unification Church might have something worthwhile to offer them, were invited by the movement to attend a residential workshop. Here they would be subjected to the so-called mind control techniques. The proposition (promoted by certain sections of the media and "anti-cultists") to be tested was that irresistible and irreversible practices employed during the workshop would result in all those who had accepted the invitation ending up as compliant "Moonies", ready to devote their lives to the every whim of their Korean Messiah, Sun Myung Moon.

What transpired was that, of over a thousand who had attended workshops in the London area during 1979, 90 percent did *not* end up joining the movement. It seemed clear, therefore, that I had to look at the individuals (rather than merely at the techniques employed during the workshops) if I were to understand why some would join and others would not. In other words, the obvious enough conclusion was that the Unification environment (its techniques and its promises) could not by itself provide a sufficient explanation for the outcome; it was necessary to take the individuals themselves into account as independent variables in the process.<sup>8</sup>

It may well be the case that Unificationists and committed members of many other new religions would *like* to be able to have more success in drawing new members to their faith. It is certainly not being denied that they tried hard to influence those who were prepared to listen, and that they could be both persistent and aggressive (and sometimes deceptive) in their proselytising efforts. Scholarly research has, however, shown over and over again that

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<sup>8</sup> Further analysis indicated, moreover, that it was not those who might, by a number of criteria independent of their joining the movement, be considered particularly weak and/or suggestible who became members (Barker 1984:203).

the techniques of persuasion employed by the NRMs is a far less efficient means of gaining new members than the practice of being born into an established tradition, such as Islam or Roman Catholicism. The fact is, however, that (a) the vast majority of people subjected to “brainwashing” find themselves perfectly capable of saying “no, thank you”, and that (b) those who do join the NRMs (and, presumably, are subjected to even greater doses of such techniques) have managed to leave of their own free will (Bromley 1988; Wright 1987). This must suggest, at least in situations which involve no physical restrictions or malfunctioning of the brain, that there is, minimally, some collaboration on the part of the individual.

Resting on an assumption diametrically opposed to that underlying the metaphor of brainwashing is the belief we can achieve total freedom. This is what the Church of Scientology offers its practitioners, the proposition being that we can, through the techniques of Dianetics and pursuing the truths revealed by L. Ron Hubbard, reach such a state (Wallis 1976).

Scientology offers humanity freedom from this needless suffering, both now and for all future time. By following the path outlined in the scripture of the Scientology religion, the thetan<sup>9</sup> can progress through higher and higher levels of spiritual awareness and return to his native state and thereby achieve complete spiritual freedom. Now, in this lifetime complete spiritual freedom can be achieved.

The primary path to this spiritual freedom is through “auditing,” one of the two central religious practices of the Scientology theology. With this freedom comes release from the eternal cycle of birth and death and full awareness, memory and ability

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<sup>9</sup> “In Scientology, the individual himself is considered to be the spiritual being – a thetan” (Hubbard 1998:7).

independent of the flesh. And with it comes a spiritual being who is “knowing and willing cause [sic] over life, thought, matter, energy, space and time.” (Hubbard 1998:562)

But while Scientology claims that it differs from the Jewish and Christian traditions in that its concept of salvation is much more immediate, those of us who have yet to encounter a “fully operating thetan” may suspect, as doubting Thomases, that (at least epistemologically) the offer of total freedom in this life is not all that different from the offer of salvation in the next one. Neither seems likely to be put to the test in the immediate future. For that reason, at least until we are proved wrong, it seems more helpful to take the pragmatic approach of considering freedom as something that will be more or less present – rather than totally present or totally absent. And this now takes us back to the question: What reduces and what increases freedom?

#### *Laws, Regularities and Degrees of Modifiability*

It has often been pointed out that knowledge of the ways in which we are *not* free can itself give us a kind of freedom – the serenity to accept the things we cannot change – or, more crudely, the freedom not to bang our heads against a brick wall. The natural sciences describe laws that clearly impose well nigh insuperable limits on our freedom. We are bound by our human bodies; we cannot escape the passage of time; we cannot deny the pull of gravity; we cannot live without food and water. Freedom from such restrictions would take us beyond this world as most of us know it – although some religions such as Shamanism teach this is not impossible, and even non-believers have reported out of body experiences.

So far as the laws of nature are concerned, however, there is general agreement in normal scientific discourse that we cannot *change* them. Their existence is independent of our

existence. None the less, through our knowledge and understanding of these laws, we can find a way around them; it is through our *use* of the laws that we can overcome some of the constraints that they have imposed on us and give ourselves new freedoms. It is insofar as we understand the functioning of gravity that we can escape the earth's atmosphere and get to the moon; it is insofar as we understand how cancer “works” that we can hope to cure the disease.

But as we move from the apparently immutable laws of physics, into chemistry, biology and then the human sciences, we enter areas of ever-increasing complexity and modifiability. As further levels of organization evolve, new properties emerge – by which I mean new constraints and new potentialities; new controls and new freedoms. Returning to my earlier metaphor, as we move within the ever-increasing complexities of social life, each level of organization forms yet another range of mountains, which, although in some ways more negotiable than the previous range, has, nevertheless, still the ability to restrict our potential actions in ways they would not otherwise have been restricted. Thus, there is nothing in the laws of physics that would prevent our driving on the “wrong” side of the road, or strangling our children, yet most of us are prevented by moral codes or the law of the land from performing such actions. But these are different kinds of restraint from the pull of gravity – and some people *do* drive on the wrong side of the road, and some people *do* strangle their children.

It is insofar as people participate in and share a socially constructed reality that we can detect regularities in the social sciences (Berger and Luckmann 1967).<sup>10</sup> Social life itself

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<sup>10</sup> The social constructs may be seen as consisting of three inter-related forms: (a) the social structures or institutions that consist of the patterned interactions between individuals in various roles (such as are to be found in the political, economic, educational, welfare, occupational, communication, family – and religious systems); (b) the cultures that are concerned with our knowledge and understanding of what the world is like; (c) the moral universe, which informs us what the world ought to be like. In all of these areas, groups and

would not be possible if there were not some tacit agreements about what the world is like; and how things ought to be done. These more or less shared perceptions of how things are and how they ought to be give rise to regularities in our behaviour, and allow us to predict how others will behave – but only up to a point, and usually as a statistical probability rather than the absolute, universal, all-time, all-places certainty that is, to most intents and purposes, the case with the natural sciences. In other words, the precise nature of the reality we construct, share, negotiate and change differs (to a greater or lesser degree) from time to time, from individual to individual, from group to group, from society to society – and from religion to religion. And this means that opportunities for freedom of individual choice differ from situation to situation.

Just as we could use our knowledge of the laws of nature to vary their operation, there is a potential for manipulation of social life through an understanding of how society operates. But there is also a difference. Not only can we use our knowledge of “social laws” – or, more warily, regular relationships between variables – to control outcomes, we can also *change the regularities themselves* so that they no longer pertain. This is partly because the regularities that occur in social life are, obviously enough, dependent for their existence upon our existence. When talking about social regularities, as opposed to the laws of physics, we might be wise to move from the ontological statement: “if X changes in a particular way, then Y will change in a particular way” to the more cautious epistemological statement: “if X changes in a particular way, then Y is likely to change in a more or less predictable way”. We can be confident that water boiled at 100 degrees centigrade under conditions of normal pressure in Jerusalem in the fifth century CE, just as it did in nineteenth century Chicago. It

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individuals in different social positions and with different visions have more or less ability and/or power to negotiate (to innovate, change and/or destroy) various aspects of the ongoing social construction – and those with religious authority have traditionally played a significant role in such processes.

is likely that the price of fish increased when the supply fell in both societies, but a number of other variables might have intervened: a dramatic fall in demand might have been due to the discovery that the local fish were poisoned, or to the introduction of a religious doctrine that believers should adopt a vegetarian diet. Such factors affecting demand would make the correlation between price and supply far more unstable and subject to the *ceteris paribus* clause. It is because social reality is an on-going process of construction, mediated through individuals with different experiences, perceptions, and interests, that it is relative to time and place – and new “knowledge” can lead to changes in regularities, which can both enhance and diminish the freedom of both individuals and groups (Popper 1961:vi).

## **RELIGION AND FREEDOM**

Religion can both expand and foreclose our horizons. It can enable us to glimpse the otherwise unimaginable – to dream the impossible dream. But it can also banish dreams from our minds by its strict and restrictive injunctions. Throughout history it has been one of the primary agents for sorting out the confusions of the human predicament by imposing order upon our understanding of what the world is like and what it should be like. But this means that it has also had a significant control over its members, restricting their freedoms through invoking feelings of guilt, or by burning them at the stake. Religious values have inspired men and women such as Albert Schweitzer and Mother Theresa. Religious edicts have underpinned suicide bombings, amputations, female infanticide and genital mutilation, and the practice of suttee. Promises of heavenly paradise in the hereafter have been juxtaposed with threats of hell fire and eternal damnation – or the prospect of being reborn as a woman.

Of course, social scientists must remain methodologically agnostic; they cannot draw on God or any other super-natural phenomenon as an independent variable. But if they want to understand ways in which freedoms can be enhanced and curtailed they need to understand the beliefs that motivate and dampen actions. Sometimes a strong religious belief leads directly to accepting, without question, a restriction of choice. In such cases, the belief can be that the decision has been made by God, or the gods, and no alternative (and, thus, no freedom of choice) is open to the believer. At one extreme there is the Calvinist doctrine of predestination (which, Weber (1930) argued, led to the rise of modern capitalism and all the new freedoms and constraints that it brought in its wake). Somewhat less immutable than predestination is the doctrine of karma, which explains why we find ourselves in the situation into which we were born – but in some sense the choice was ours, even though we may have been unaware at the time that we were deciding our destiny. We can, however, become aware of what the consequences of our actions will be for the future and, through following the correct path, make more enlightened choices.

Another position is that God's expectations are irresistible despite the appearance of choice – this was the gist of Luther's "*ich kann nicht anders*".<sup>11</sup> At the same time, there lies at the base of Christian theodicy the belief that God had given Adam and Eve freedom to sin in the Garden of Eden – and sin they not only could, but did. Then there is the belief that we no longer enjoy the freedom that is our birthright. What, it can be asked, are we to do in the face of the belief "*L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers*"?<sup>12</sup> Scientologists teach that the thetan is born free, but, because of the accumulation of "engrams" (blockages) over a number of lives, needs to become "Clear" – which is possible through the technology of

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther "I can do no other". Speech at the Diet of Worms 18 April 1521 (written on his monument at Worms.)

<sup>12</sup> "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." Opening sentence of Rousseau (1968) chapter one.

Dianetics (Hubbard 1998:xx, 65ff). Yet another conviction is that the only real choice open to the believer is to submit to the God in “whose service is perfect freedom”.<sup>13</sup> Be it for good (Durkheim 1968) or ill (Marx 1963), religious beliefs can also control our aspirations by adding an extra legitimacy to “the way things are” in society and, thereby, making us less likely to question the status quo. As the popular hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, puts it:

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And order'd their estate (Alexander 1848).

### *Pluralism and Individual Conversion*

A frequent rejoinder to those who complain that belonging to a religion diminishes one's freedom is to say that one has freely chosen to accept religious membership and the restrictions associated with that religion. The subject of brainwashing removing that initial choice has already been discussed, but it should be noted that it is only relatively recently that, practically (or socially) speaking, the choice of religion was open to more than a few individuals – usually those in privileged positions. For the majority of the population, one's religion was determined by one's social superiors. Thus, if the monarch changed his or her religion (because, to take the case of Henry VIII, he wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn), then his subjects were expected to change too. A new king, queen or lord as a result of conquest (as at the time of the Crusades) or inheritance (as with the ascension of Mary Tudor to the throne of England) could also lead to an overnight change in an entire population's religious allegiance. Indeed, an individual could be “converted” several times in his or her life on account of the institution of *cuius regio eius*

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<sup>13</sup> Church of England *Book of Common Prayer*, Second Collect, Morning Prayer.



*religio*.<sup>14</sup> Shifting our language once again, the concept of *Une foi, un loi, un roi* (one faith, one law, one king) epitomises the way in which the state, society, and religion were all bound up together in people's minds and experience. There was not the distinction that we now take for granted between public and private, or between civic and personal:

"One faith" was viewed as essential to civil order – how else would society hold together? And without the right faith, pleasing to God who upholds the natural order, there was sure to be disaster. Heresy was treason, and vice versa. Religious toleration, which to us seems such a necessary virtue in public life, was considered tantamount to letting drug dealers move next door and corrupt your children, a view for the cynical and world-weary who had forgotten God and no longer cared about the health of society (Le Poulet Gauche 1998:5/2).

This is not to say that individuals of lowly status might not convert – many of the new religions of yesteryear appealed disproportionately to the oppressed classes (Cohn 1970; Worsley 1968) – but there was often a high price to pay. To choose to convert might involve the “choice” of being thrown to the lions for an early Christian, or being burned at the stake for a medieval Cathar. Less dramatically, those who chose not to attend church in the reign of Elizabeth I would be fined one shilling – a sum that could be accepted as a religious tax for aristocratic Catholics, but was hardly a viable option for lowly peasants.

It can be argued that it was the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries from Europe and North America who were first concerned with the widespread conversion of individual

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<sup>14</sup> Literally “Whose the region, his the religion”, meaning that the religion practised by the ruler of a region determined the religion practiced by his or her subjects.

souls, rather than a mass switch motivated from the top.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the ideology of individualism, freedom and choice had been becoming increasingly prevalent.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, with the growth of modernization, personal identity has become increasingly associated with individual achievements and, on the other hand, authority figures of yore, including religious leaders, have been commanding less respect. This can be associated with, among other things, changes in family life, educational methods (with a shifting focus from rote learning to personal enquiry and experimentation), and the phenomenal growth of the mass media which has both undermined the authority of political and religious leaders and offered a previously inaccessible wealth of alternative ideas to anyone who can read or access a radio transmitter, a television – or, now, the world wide web.

The significance of these changes should not be exaggerated, but they certainly cannot be ignored. There can be little doubt that the concept of individual freedom has reached an unprecedented pervasiveness with the rhetoric and practice of hitherto unimaginable proportions. But the freedom with which contemporary Western individuals and groups are faced can be a double-edged sword. As already intimated, freedom is a multifaceted concept embodying many complexities.

## **TENSIONS BETWEEN COMPETING FREEDOMS**

In the contemporary quest for freedom it is possible to observe a seemingly contradictory relationship between freedom on the one hand, and choice and control on the other. The contradiction lies in the fact that *either* too much *or* too little choice and/or control can lead

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<sup>15</sup> It is not being suggested that mass conversion is necessarily beyond the control of the individual. An interesting case in the twentieth century is the mass conversions of Dalits, first out of Hinduism and then into Buddhism, and then, in this century, into Christianity. Interestingly, these have been of a more political than religious nature.

<sup>16</sup> This could be seen much earlier, in the classical period and during the Enlightenment, but had been almost entirely confined to the educated or intellectual classes until, perhaps, the French Revolution of 1789.

to a diminution of freedom. In other words, while it might seem fairly obvious that removing choices and imposing controls can decrease freedom, and that increasing choices and reducing control can increase freedom, it is also true that *reducing choices and imposing controls can result in a subjective experience of more rather than less freedom; and reducing controls and having more choices can result in less rather than more freedom.*

The theoretical reasoning behind this statement starts from the definition I suggested earlier: (a) choice depends on our being able to anticipate possible futures; (b) any reliable anticipation must depend on order and predictability; (c) just as one cannot have choice without order and predictability, one cannot have freedom without control.<sup>17</sup> Let us, however, look at some empirical examples.

It has been suggested that the contemporary West (Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) is one of those times and places when traditional religious authority has been relatively ineffective as a controlling influence in individuals' lives.<sup>18</sup> While the vast majority of people remain in the religion into which they were born, the West has seen an increasing number choosing to move away from traditional institutional religion in a number of directions. These may be divided into five main ideal types. First, there are what may be called the "hard secularists" who reject the existence of God or gods and who may belong to some Humanist Association or follow a Marxist/Leninist or other atheistic ideology. Secondly, there the "soft secularists" who differ significantly from the previous type in that they do not deny the existence of God, but see no reason to attend a place of worship or bring religion into their lives – except on occasions of stress or, perhaps, as part of a rite de

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<sup>17</sup> It might be claimed that mine is a somewhat idiosyncratic definition, but it is hard to imagine *any* definition that would not rely on some order in the physical *and* social universe.

<sup>18</sup> This has also been true for different reasons in Eastern Europe where, as will be discussed in more detail below and in the rest of this special issue, secularism had been imposed by the socialist states with varying degrees of stringency until 1989.

passage, at which times they expect the professionals to be there to provide whatever support is needed or appropriate. Thirdly, there are fundamentalist groups that have a strong belief in The Truth and who tend to separate themselves from the rest of society with a strong social, and sometimes geographical, boundary. Unlike the soft secularists, their religion is a primary source of their identity and has a bearing on pretty well every aspect of their highly structured lives. In these groups there is relatively little room for individuals to interpret their beliefs or negotiate their behaviour, such matters being decided by the group's scripture and/or leaders. The fourth type is in many ways diametrically opposed to the third. It is one in which, to use their own language, spirituality rather than religiosity is celebrated. God is perceived as something within each individual rather than "out there". External authority is rejected in favour of personal responsibility; bounded groups are replaced by networks of the like-minded; and there is frequently a stress on the feminine and ecological values. Fifthly, there are the NRMs, about which it is impossible to generalise, but which can be seen to span all the previous types, but particularly those of fundamentalism and spirituality.

A point that needs to be made here is that the diversity of religion in contemporary globalizing society reflects the diversity to be found in individual lives. Not only do people differ from others within their own societies, but their lives differ, often dramatically, from those of their parents. To paint two vastly over-simplified caricatures: some individuals experience their society as chaotic and/or libertarian, with no standards and no purpose; others experience the same society as an authoritarian, bureaucratic rat race within which we have to play roles that are imposed upon us by our parents, the educational system and "them", who expect us to conform to restrictive norms and controls.

It is individuals of the first type who may feel that their freedom is increased as their choices are removed. They yearn to be informed that they are free to go to one way only – The Way. In such an environment (which is on offer from new and old fundamentalist religions), one is unencumbered by the doubts and uncertainties of not knowing who one is, where one belongs, what to do, or how or why to do it. If one recognises the confusion that too much choice can bring in its wake, it is not all that difficult to understand the attraction of religions that are considered exploitative, oppressive or totalitarian by non-members, and it makes perfectly good sense to talk about choosing to have the freedom to be controlled. I have spoken to numerous members of the more authoritarian and controlling new religions, and many in more established fundamentalist groups, who have found it an enormous relief to be able to develop within an environment in which they do not constantly have to make decisions. This can be true whether the decision concerns the choice of a marriage partner or what toothpaste to use – whether one is talking about an ultimate goal (such as salvation) or the means to achieve that goal (by doing what the Messiah orders, by chanting a sacred mantra for so many hours a day, or by witnessing to others who need to be saved). To be *free from* the responsibility of making such decisions appears to afford large numbers of individuals the opportunity to become *free to* develop their lives in ways that would not have been available to them in “normal” circumstances.<sup>19</sup>

Like the representatives of the first caricature, those of the second type are also on a quest to be “free from” in order to be “free to”. But while the former choose to retreat into the bounded, even womblike nature of highly prescriptive and ordered religions in order to lead meaningful lives (in what I have called elsewhere “the freedom of the cage”), the latter

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<sup>19</sup> Not unrelatedly, Susan Palmer (1994) has argued that one of the attractions for women in new religions is that the movements offer them single rather than multiple roles; they can be accepted as a mother *or* a lover *or* a sister (or what have you) instead of constantly having to juggle with the conflicting demands of modern society.

feel the need to pursue their freedom in a diametrically opposite direction – and may find themselves ensnared in “the cage of freedom” (Barker 1995). In the hope of achieving self-development or self-realization, these individuals are persuaded, particularly by the rhetoric of sections of the Human Potential movement, that it is only by getting rid of all social controls and constraints that their “true selves” can be released and flourish. By rejecting the structures, rules and roles that have been imposed since childhood, the liberated “real me” will, it is claimed, emerge. However, while it is true that freeing oneself of some social and cultural restrictions can undoubtedly have a liberating effect, it is also true that too much “liberation” can become counter-productive – at least from a sociological perspective that sees human beings as fundamentally (though not only) social beings. Freedom has been envisaged as the opportunity to do anything, but, as Durkheim (1952) argued in *Suicide* and elsewhere, the removal of restraints can lead to a situation of confusion or anomie. The “liberated individual” can regress back to the “freedom” of a pre-socialised child. As imbued values are rejected, one can find oneself without any standards to act as a benchmark for assessing where one stands in relation to oneself or to the social world out there. Chaos, confusion and a loss of self-identity may ensue, with, perhaps, an escalating dependency upon the group or guru offering the “freedom”.

There are, of course, many other kinds of tensions and balances with which freedom can present us in the religious sphere. To some extent we have already been discussing choices between competing freedoms (a dilemma dissolved by those who believe in total freedom or total absence of freedom). At its most stark we are faced with the choice between this freedom and that freedom: if we wish to lead a life of devotion in an enclosed monastery, for example, we might have to give up several freedoms we would otherwise enjoy. More usually we have to prioritise our choices, and it can be argued that we have greater overall freedom

insofar as we allow ourselves to be inconsistent in our choices, rather than sticking rigidly to the same hierarchy in every situation.<sup>20</sup>

### *Our Freedoms and Their Freedoms*

Moving from the individual to the group level, one of the fiercest tensions throughout the history of religion has been that between our freedom and their freedom. This can take a number of forms, some of which do not involve violence, but strong and genuine beliefs that one person or group knows better than another group what is in the best interest of that other, the former forcing the latter to make a choice – but the option of democracy may not be what a theocratically minded nation wants.

Another example concerns the freedom of parents to bring up their children according to their beliefs. This can give rise to the potentially opposing freedom of children to make up their own minds. It has also led well-intentioned courts, acting they believe in the best interests of the child, to grant custody to one parent, rather than the other, who belongs to an unpopular religion but who, according to a number of other generally accepted criteria, would appear to be the more appropriate parent to bring up the child. There have also been cases (in Australia, Canada and elsewhere) when children have been removed by the state from indigenous groups to residential schools and/or adopted for rearing by “more civilised” guardians. Still on the subject of children, there is the dilemma faced by some liberally minded parents of whether taking their children to a place of worship on a regular basis gives them more or less choice to accept or reject that (or any other) religion in the future than not taking them to the services would.

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<sup>20</sup> In an excellent paper addressing the issue of violence, Edgar Mills (1996:385) argues that normative dissonance increases moral autonomy and serves as a source of restraint upon extreme behaviour in groups.

Brief mention has already been made of how, when the Berlin Wall came down, the concept of freedom was on everyone's lips, and that of freedom of religion was one of the more frequently heard catch phrases in the rhetoric of the time. The countries of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union had been living under atheistic regimes that had, to a greater or lesser extent, imposed severe restrictions on religious institutions and practices. Priests had been imprisoned and murdered; churches and mosques destroyed or used for secular purposes; those who were known to be religious were denied advancement in their careers and their children were denied university education. Once the state imposed secularism was removed, the traditional religions not unnaturally wanted to reclaim their property – and their flock.

They faced a great number of problems, however. These included poverty, lack of experience in pastoral and educational skills; an ageing priesthood; accusations of collaboration and a theologically ignorant population. A further problem that soon became apparent was the massive influx of proselytising religions from the West which had scrambled over the rubble of the Berlin Wall to offer their religious and spiritual wares to fill what they perceived to be a gaping ideological vacuum. Some of these religions had been operating underground during the Soviet period, but now the new missionaries were, the Mother Churches complained, bribing their innocent flock with all manner of secular temptations such as English lessons, free travel, and “know how” of various complexions, such as helping those whom they saw as potential converts to start up and run small businesses. One of the consequences has been that many of the traditional Churches have been encouraging the state to curtail the freedom of the foreign religions (and some indigenous new religions), and, at the same time, to protect and enhance their own freedoms by granting them exclusive rights to evangelise, to have free air-time in the media, to provide



religious instruction in the schools, and/or to receive financial support (Barker 1997; 2003; Shterin 2000).

### *Religious Freedom and State Control*

Control of religion by the state apparatus can be found to a greater or lesser degree in most, if not all, societies.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes this control has been perfectly benign, even advantageous for the religions concerned; but history provides all too many examples of states attacking the religious freedoms of other countries through invasion and conquest, and of their crushing religions in their own countries (the Soviet regime was but one contemporary example). The repression has been and continue to be both within religions and between religions; the consequences have ranged from irritating byelaws to complete extermination of the targeted groups.

One of the most extreme examples in recent times of a state using religion to control its citizens was the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the latter half of the 1990s. Women in particular were denied all manner of freedoms, and lived in constant fear of their lives for any minor misdemeanour; they were denied the right to education or to work or even to appear in public unless completely covered by a burqua.<sup>22</sup> Under the strict shari'a law (as enforced by some Nigerian states, for example), a person may be executed for converting out of Islam or for blasphemy against it – and those found guilty of adultery may be stoned to death. Elsewhere, the sentences might be less draconian, but still impose severe restrictions on religious freedom. To take one recent innovation, the Gujarat "Freedom of Religious Conversion Bill", passed in March 2003, provides for three years in prison for any

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<sup>21</sup> This applies even to countries such as the United States of America with strict separation of Church and State, despite (or, it can be argued, because of) the First Amendment to its Constitution by, for example, forbidding manifestation of religion in public schools. This, of course, takes us into the "right to have freedom from religion" debate.

<sup>22</sup> Sally Armstrong, CBC Radio interview October 2001.

conversion ruled to have been by "use of force or by allurement or by fraudulent means."

The Bill includes the ruling that any person undergoing conversion must receive prior approval from the head of the district or risk one year's imprisonment.

Historically, Europe has been privy to some of the most brutal scenes of religious persecution throughout the world. Apart from the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, and the annihilation of various heretical sects, the twentieth century witnessed not only the holocaust, when Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses were murdered in gas chambers along with gypsies, homosexuals and other "undesirables", but also the horrific happenings in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, when Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic labels were used to intensify the intransigence of the bloody hostilities.<sup>23</sup>

In present-day Europe the control of religion is usually more subtle.<sup>24</sup> Constitutions nearly always declare that the country supports freedom of religion and most of Europe's states are signatories not only to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, but also to numerous other declarations on religious freedom that have been penned by international organisations such as the OSCE.<sup>25</sup> None the less, this does not necessarily deter the countries from limiting religious freedoms – particularly in the case of unpopular minority religions. For example, several OSCE participating states have reneged on their commitments by destroying publications belonging to ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness).<sup>26</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses have been violently attacked in several

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<sup>23</sup> See the following article by Michael Sells for some gruesome details of the violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that twenty-first century Europe is currently one of the less restrictive regions for religion – which could be to say more about the atrocities that have been occurring elsewhere (particularly in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East) than about the liberalism of Europe.

<sup>25</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

<sup>26</sup> Paragraph 16.10 of the Vienna Concluding Document of 1989 states that religious faiths, institutions and organisations should be allowed to produce, import and disseminate religious publications and materials.

countries of the Former Soviet Union – the beatings in Georgia have been particularly vehement. They have also been imprisoned for refusing to engage in military service – even in countries, such as Armenia, which has made a commitment to the Council of Europe to end the sentencing of conscientious objectors. It is a curious twist to the cause of freedom that a religion can be viewed as such a threat to society because its members refuse to bear arms.

Although the vast majority of members of the current wave of new religions are no more or less law-abiding than the general population, a small number have been responsible for some appalling tragedies. The first incident to hit the headlines was the mass suicides and murders in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 by Jim Jones and his followers in the Peoples Temple; the first to directly affect Europe (especially the French-speaking parts) was the suicides and murders of members of the Solar Temple in 1994/5; and the first to shake the world by directly attacking innocent bystanders completely unrelated to the movement was the release of poisonous gas in the Tokyo underground by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995.

It is not entirely surprising that few would support a religion's freedom to carry out behaviour of this kind. But while some countries consider that their criminal law is sufficient to deal with such actions, other countries have decided that it is necessary to introduce special legislation that distinguishes between religions - and, in the cases of, for example, Austria, France and Belgium, Russia and Armenia, to combat non-traditional religions and sects. France and Belgium set up observatories explicitly for this purpose.<sup>27</sup> Catherine Picard, co-architect of the 2001 French Law for Prevention and Repression of Sectarian

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<sup>27</sup> MILS (*la Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sects/Interministerial Mission to Fight the Sects*), succeeded in November 2002 by MIVILUDES (*Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires/Interministerial Mission to Observe and Fight Deviant Sects*) in France; and CIAOSN/IACSSO (*Centre d'information et d'avis sur les organisations sectaires nuisibles?/Information and Advice Centre concerning Harmful Sectarian Movements*) in Belgium.

Movements, is reported to have said “We need to give judges repressive tools. The law is a response to the evolution of society and the growing importance that sects have in it.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the technical problems to which such discrimination gives rise is that of definition. First, it has to be decided what constitutes a “real” religion; secondly, criteria need to be produced for deciding whether a particular religion is an “established”, “state”, “national”, or “traditional” religion – or whether it is a “cult”, “sect” or “pseudo-religion” (Barker 1994). Sometimes the distinctions are not made overtly; the criteria for registration can, for example, include length of time in the country or the number of members – which will, of course, tend to discriminate against foreign and relatively new religions, usually putting them at a disadvantage compared to the longer established religions. Another, means of differentiation is simply to name those religions to which special legislation may apply.

Distinguishing between religions for legislative purposes is, however, neither a universal nor a necessary practice. The Netherlands, for example, manages to circumvent the need to evoke an irrelevant and potentially discriminatory definition of religion (let alone a criterion to distinguish between religions), and tax concessions rest on a legal status that is related to the financial (rather than religious) status of the organisation.

### *Reports*

A number of societies have felt the need to commission governmental Reports on new religions. Some of these (Sweden and the Netherlands being examples) concluded that there is no need for distinguishing between new and old religions in law. Others (such as Russia and France) consider the new religions or “sects” to be a potential or actual threat to society. The French and Belgian Reports included lists of, respectively, 172 and 184 sects, the names of nearly all of which were supplied by anti-cult organisations (Gest and Guyard 1995;

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Bosco “China’s French Connection” *Washington Times* editorial (10 July 2001).

Duquesne and Willems 1997). The Belgian list included the Quakers, Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, Opus Dei, a small Jesuit community and the YWCA (though not the YMCA) and various other movements considered perfectly respectable in other societies.<sup>29</sup> The Reports led to protests from a number of quarters, including several scholars of new religions (Introvigne and Melton 1996; Fautré 1998). Belgian and French officials have pointed out that the lists have no legal standing, but the fact that they appeared in governmental Reports would seem to have given permission to those French and Belgian citizens who are so inclined to discriminate against the specified members, members of which have lost their jobs, been denied the right to buy or rent property or to hire halls for worship, have had their children excluded from certain schools and have, on occasion, been the object of violent attacks, which has included the bombing of Unification and New Acropolis property in Paris (Lheureux 2000; U. S. Dept of State 2000:218, 241-3).

### *Registration*

A requirement for religions to be registered with the state may lead to a reduction of freedoms as it allows the state to keep a close watch on and potentially to control the religion's practices. But registration can also bring special privileges, such as the right to give religious instruction in schools, or to receive various kinds of financial benefits; and not to be registered can incur penalties and restrictions – members may not be able to manifest their religion, and/or to act as a legal entity.<sup>30</sup>

One of the requirements for registration according to the 1997 Russian Federation Federal Law on Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations is documental proof that the organisation 'has existed over the course of no less than fifteen years on the relevant

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<sup>29</sup> The Swedish Report also included a list of religions in Sweden – but this list was of *all* the known religions, including both what was then the State Church and five satanic groups (Ingvardsson 1988).

<sup>30</sup> See the articles by Schanda, Gunn, and Crnic and Lesjak in this volume.

territory' (Art. 11.5).<sup>31</sup> Those religions that do not succeed in getting registered may be 'liquidated',<sup>32</sup> and at the time of writing several new and not so new foreign religions (such as the Salvation Army and Jehovah's Witnesses) are fighting in the courts in their attempts to avoid liquidation.<sup>33</sup> In October 2002, the President of Belarus signed what has been described as Europe's most repressive Law (Corley 2002). The new law outlaws unregistered religious activity; requires compulsory prior censorship for all religious literature; bans foreign citizens from leading religious organisations; religious education is restricted to faiths that have ten registered communities, including at least one that had registration in 1982; and there is a ban on all but occasional small religious meetings in private homes.

Far more could be written, but space is limited and enough has already been said to indicate that there many ways in which contemporary states select for special treatment not only religions, but particular religions. This can be to protect their freedoms, but more often it is to curtail the freedoms of both individuals and groups on account of their beliefs as much as, if not more than, because of their actions.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Several approaches to the subject of religion and freedom have been touched upon. It has been pointed out that individuals may be influenced or persuaded to join, stay in, or leave a particular religion through personal knowledge (or ignorance) or because of the actions of the religion itself, the state, or their immediate social environment. At the group level,

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<sup>31</sup> An English translation by Lawrence Uzzell of the Law can be found as Appendix A of *Emory International Law Review* 12/1 (1998:657-680).

<sup>32</sup> Article 14 lays out the grounds for 'liquidating' a religious organisation.

<sup>33</sup> On 10 July 2001 the Salvation Army filed an application with the European Court of Human Rights requesting an intervention to prevent their imminent liquidation by the Russian judicial authorities.

religions may reduce or enhance the freedom of their own members and also have considerable influence on the lives of non-members – and they may have their freedoms increased or curtailed by the state or other sections of society. The pressures put upon them can take a variety of forms, ranging from derogatory labels to violent extermination.

It has been argued that the human condition is such that, in the absence of physical restraint or a malfunctioning of the brain, freedom is unlikely to be either totally present or totally absent. Freedom is, rather, a complicated, multi-faceted concept, which can be recognised (or hidden) in many guises, and which embraces a number of tensions and apparent paradoxes. Just as what is agoraphobic for one person can be claustrophobic for another, so a social situation experienced as liberating for one individual, can appear stultifying and repressive for another. But social situations, although they are very real and have to be taken into account if we are not to bang our heads against that (socially constructed) brick wall, are more or less negotiable. There are some situations that we can change – insofar as we understand *how* we are constrained, there are other situations we cannot change, or which involve a cost greater than we would want to pay.

Maximising freedom requires knowledge of what goes with what, and what the potential consequences might be. Social science cannot tell us what our goals are, but it can try to increase our knowledge and understanding of what information we need to decide whether to accept, change or reject the way things are and our understanding of how they ought to be.

It has been suggested that the regularities we find in the social sciences are to some degree dependent on our “knowledge” (widely defined) and, thus, to some extent open to change. This means that our work in the sociology of religion can itself contribute to both an

increase and a diminution of freedom for those whom we study. If done well,<sup>34</sup> we might empower people to recognise what they can change, and what they cannot change, or what they might make even more intransigent by their attempt to change – which might, of course, be for the promotion of either good or evil.

The other side of the coin is that if we do not point out the complexities, but allow people to interpret our findings in an overly simple direction, without due warning of the processes involved and of the potentially counter-productive consequences of the pursuit of freedom, then we, as sociologists of religion, might be held responsible – to at least some extent – for decreasing their freedom.

Niebuhr appealed to God to help us to have the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, and the courage to change those things we can. This essay has been an appeal to sociologists of religion to contribute to a wisdom that might help us better to recognise and understand the difference.

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<sup>34</sup> By “well” I mean, efficiently – providing reliable information that helps us to understand what goes with what, and with what degree of inevitability this goes with that, under whichever circumstances in whatever situation. In other words, a “good” sociologist is good in the sense that he or she is efficient at his or her job in the sense that a “good” corkscrew opens bottles – not that a good corkscrew opens bottles that it is good to have opened.



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