Article

Parsons on Christianity

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Abstract
In his late work on Christianity, Talcott Parsons obviously built upon the writings of both Durkheim and Weber. While he departed from the idea that increasing differentiation of the system of action did not have to threaten the unity of the system as a whole, his emphasis on structural differentiation was also complemented by one on value integration. He believed that, especially in the New World, religion (i.e. Christianity) has gradually become able to impose its definition of the situation in highly different, highly heterogeneous contexts of action. In this paper, I reconstruct Parsons' historical-sociological analyses of the relation between Christianity and modern society. I discuss how Parsons appropriated the writings of Durkheim and Weber – in ways which did not fully exploit the potential of some of these writings. I suggest some alternatives, which rely less on a concern with value integration (Durkheim) but more on one with the differentiation of meaning systems (Weber).

Keywords
Christianity, Talcott Parsons, religion, secularization, structural differentiation, value integration

I

In the latter part of his career, Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) devoted much attention to the relation between religion and modern society. His interest in religion went hand in hand with his growing interest in evolutionary processes of the *longue durée*. What social scientists call the modern type of society, he maintained, does not have multiple independent origins 'but has originated in one specific complex, within the area broadly called western Europe, and has been diffused from there ... On the religious side the area of origin of modern societies has been Christian' (Parsons, 1978: 173). While he did

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stress that evolutionary changes of the societal system might have been 'caused' by a variety of factors, and that religion itself had not 'produced' modern society, he also stated that Christianity had 'contributed a crucial complex of factors ... [to] the developmental process' (1978: 174). Against the secularization theories of his time, he argued, moreover, that Christianity continued to take modern society, especially in its 20th-century American variant, in very specific, religiously meaningful directions. Adherence to a generalized (Judeo-)Christian framework of meaning was in his view one of the most distinctive features of the North American world.

Overall, Parsons' late work on Christianity has remained work-in-progress. It was presented in a number of essays and invited papers. Although many of these manuscripts were reprinted in the collections *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (1967) and *Action Theory and the Human Condition* (1978), they also bear the mark of the special occasion for which they were originally written. Although Parsons modelled his approach after Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, he never devoted a monograph specifically to the subject of religion, and left no single work designed to be of theoretical and empirical reach similar to *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim, 1960) or the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Weber, 1988). He had to leave his work unfinished. But it still is of sociological interest – not only for Parsons' substantive analyses of the relation between religion and society, but also for his attempts to build and elaborate upon both Durkheim and Weber.

For his analyses, Parsons primarily relied upon a differentiation-theoretical framework. He built on the idea that specialization and systemic autonomy depend on the establishment and institutionalization of boundaries or zones of indifference. Differentiation allows systems to generate their own dynamics, their own 'functional' logic. For Parsons, the differentiation from the world prevented religion (i.e. Christianity) from being absorbed in a non-religious environment, in this-worldly commitments. But he also argued that the Christian church was gradually able to acquire an independent position from which influence could be exerted on its secular or worldly environment. Separated from the world, it became able to inspire a divinely ordained mission for mankind, a long-term effort to do His will and build His kingdom *on earth*. In Parsons' view, this inner-worldly activism was intensified in the Western, ascetic branch of Protestantism, which particularly stressed the importance of human agency in creating a Holy Community. In highly complex and highly differentiated societies, Calvinism or Puritanism in particular were capable of providing the meaning of meaning, of giving a religious legitimation to the 'system-goal for the good society' (Parsons, 1962: 148).

This paper is devoted to a critical reconstruction of Parsons' late work on Christianity in its relation with society.[1] In the following, I will discuss how Parsons treated the Christian tradition as a relatively stable source of 'anxieties' that could be taken in different directions in different contexts, depending on a number of factors. I will pay attention to the factors that, in Parsons' view, constituted relevant evolutionary differences. I will also discuss how Parsons mobilized and appropriated classical sociological traditions for his own analyses – in ways which do not fully exploit the potential of these traditions. This reconstruction thus intends to shed light on both the possibilities and the limitations of Parsons' later sociology. On this basis, this paper may also constitute a

contribution to contemporary discussions in sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular.

II

For Parsons, historical-sociological analyses of religion had to address 'a special problem' (1967: 390). This problem especially emerged in evolutionary analyses of the *longue durée*, which involved two or more 'stages' or 'phases' in a process of differentiation. It referred to the difficulty of analytically distinguishing between the gradual differentiation of religion from society, on the one hand, and the modes of integration of the societal system as a whole, on the other. In his own, somewhat cumbersome prose, Parsons described the problem as

> one of analyzing the continuities, not only of the component called by the same name in the different stages, e.g. *religion*, but also of the senses in which the patterns of orientation given in the earlier stages have or have not been fundamentally altered in their significance for the system as a whole, considering the exigencies of the situations in which action takes place and the complex relations of this part to the other parts of the more differentiated system, e.g. the non-religious or secular. (1967: 391, his emphasis)

Against this background, and inspired by a re-reading of Durkheim's work, Parsons' analyses depart from the idea that a religious individualism was inherent in Christianity (see Parsons, 1978: 213–32). For Parsons, this Christian individualism allowed for a 'distanced' attitude vis-à-vis the existing social order. In Judaism, he argued, the primary religious concern was with the fate of the Jewish community as Jahweh's chosen people. In Christianity, however, 'God was concerned with the salvation of individuals, not simply with the extent to which a social community as such adhered to His commandments' (1967: 392). In this view, the 'brothers in Christ' became an association of believers, of individuals who were 'truly in the faith'. The early Church of Christ could thus present itself as a social collectivity grounded on belief, not an ethnic one (a tribe, a people). In Parsons' terms, this conception of a church provided the theological basis for a 'critical step' with regard to differentiation processes. It

> constituted the *differentiation* of Christianity as a religious system (a cultural system) from the conception of a 'people' as a social system. Given the Roman ascendancy in the secular society of the time, this differentiation was expressed in the famous formula 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' – that is, the church did not claim jurisdiction over secular society as such. (1967: 392–3, his emphasis; see also Parsons, 1966a: 126; 1978: 179)

This Christian individualism did not just lead to the virtual abandonment of concern with life in the world. The 'brothers in Christ' were not only concerned with their respective personal salvations. They neither withdrew from nor positively sanctioned the imperial Roman society of the time; they merely 'tolerated' it. Parsons focused on some underlying tensions between the other-worldly and this-worldly orientations in Christianity, on the 'dualism inherent in the whole Christian movement' (1978: 196). He did

not just put emphasis on the world-rejecting nature of religion, but also stressed the genesis of the interventionist or activistic orientation of Christianity, and its 'historic mission' to transform the world and build the Kingdom of God on earth. In his view, the differentiation between religion and society did not signify the loss of religious concerns in favour of worldly or secular interests. It provided, by contrast, the opportunity to strengthen the significance of religion in the 'developmental process'; it provided the opportunity to organize the world of secular life in terms of Christian principles. Of course, the Christianization of society depended upon a wide variety of factors, such as the lasting political instabilities after the collapse of the Roman Empire. But increasing structural differentiation in the society as a whole constituted in his view the most important single development. 'Indeed, in the larger perspective the power of religiously grounded values to shape secular life has depended on the increasing structural differentiation of religion from the organization of the secular society' (1978: 175).

In order to illustrate his line of analysis, Parsons highlighted the symbolic relevance of the coronation of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III. In early-medieval Europe, this coronation made clear that the head of the church assumed moral responsibility for the secular sphere. But it also signalled the acceptance by the worldly monarch of the obligation to act, in his capacity as worldly leader, as a Christian. In Parsons' view, the differentiation of the two spheres made a new and higher form of synthesis between both spheres possible. It allowed for the gradual institutionalization of common values in Europe.

> Church and state then symbolically shared their commitment to Christian values ... It was definitely a putting of the seal of religious legitimacy on the differentiation of the two spheres and their fundamental independence from each other as organized collectivities. But a true differentiation always involves at the same time an allegiance to common values and norms. (1967: 396)

Parsons also discussed the development in the Western church of collective monasticism (as distinguished from anchoritism) from his differentiation-theoretical point of view. In his interpretation, the ascetic's withdrawal from the world, symbolized by the vows of poverty and chastity, insured the independence from secular ties. The ascetic's vow of obedience, on the other hand, was an institution which assured 'selective obedience to religious authority ... and hence protection against nonreligious influences and pressures' (1978: 185). The differentiation from the world thus served to preserve the 'purity' of Christian faith. But, as the Benedict Order soon made clear, the differentiation from the secular world could also be used as a basis for specific involvements within the world. Although it consisted of segregated communities devoted to a special religious life, the Benedict Order also had its this-worldly aspect. Parsons summarized his view as follows:

> The Benedictine Rule instituted a regime of secular useful work for its members, labor in agriculture and in crafts, as a religiously valued ascetic exercise – as Weber particularly noted. One might say that labor was no longer conceived as simply the 'curse of Adam,' but as an essential component of the most fully Christian way of life ... Fostering this orientation, the Benedictine order was the first in a series of involvements by the monastic

elements of the Western church with the problems, first, of firmly establishing the church in its relations with secular society and, second, of improving secular society itself from a Christian point of view. (1978: 187)[2]

Many have spoken of the Christian Middle Ages (see also Gorski, 2000). Along the same lines, Parsons argued that medieval European societies were the first in history to have basic religious uniformity for a very large population as a whole. But he attributed the church's increasing relevance for these worlds to its increasing independence from these worlds: 'they fundamentally differentiated the religious organization, the church, from the secular structure, what in this special sense has been called the state' (Parsons, 1978: 190). He also pointed to two other 'crucial developments' in the first centuries of the second millennium. One was the investiture controversy between secular and religious authorities, i.e. the controversy about the control over the appointment (or investiture) of church officials, which was eventually decided in favour of the ecclesiastical authorities. The other was the imposition of celibacy for the secular clergy by the Lateran Councils in the 12th century. However imperfect the enforcement of celibacy may have been, the policy meant that no priest (including bishops or abbots, who were often men of great wealth and power) could have *legitimate* heirs, so that clerical office could not become hereditary. In an era in which the institution of hereditary aristocracy began to dominate within the secular societies and states of Europe, the church opted for another trajectory. 'The imposition of clerical celibacy had been a measure to protect the autonomy of the church from over-involvement in the responsibilities, as well as the perquisites and privileges, of secular affairs' (1978: 191).

Following Parsons, however, the medieval church remained strongly enmeshed in worldly affairs and worldly responsibilities: 'the church was so interwoven with the feudal system that, as property holder, it also became the lord with temporal political jurisdiction' (1978: 191). In Parsons' view, the differentiation between religion and the secular world during the medieval era therefore remained 'unstable' (1978: 191). The church's allegiance could lie with the religious sphere or with the secular authority. The autonomy and influence of the Christian church were in other words repeatedly threatened, because the Church had to enlist worldly power in order to succeed in its project of Christianizing secular society.

Against this historical background, Parsons argued that the Protestant Reformation constituted a new 'phase' in the relation between Christianity and society, between the cultural and the social system (e.g. 1967: 402–12). In his view, the Reformation constituted 'the culmination in the strictly religious sphere of the general trend of social and cultural change away from the medieval system and toward modernity' (1978: 192). Relying foremost upon Weber's work, Parsons thereby emphasized the relevance of two changes: the downgrading of the distinction between clergy and laity, and the elimination of the religious orders. The Protestant reformers no longer perceived the clergy as the manipulators of divine grace, as the mediators between God and men. The distinction between the clergy and the laity thus lost much of its religious significance. Every individual was 'granted' the same, immediate kind of contact with God; the idea of 'universal priesthood' could be institutionalized. The abolition of the religious orders pointed in the same direction. It implied that 'religious merit' became compatible with

any ethically acceptable worldly 'calling'. It also became compatible with marriage. 'Luther's marriage, from this point of view, symbolized his conviction that the fully religious life could be lived in the ordinary status of the lay citizen and not only as a monk or priest' (Parsons, 1978: 306). In Protestant Christianity, religious obligations could be discharged by laymen in lay occupations, rather than by clergy in segregated monastic communities. From Parsons' point of view, the Reformation 'had emancipated secular society from ecclesiastical tutelage and put it "on its own"' (1978: 196). But he also argued that the increasing distance between religion and the secular world allowed for new forms of synthesis.

In Parsons' view, the Reformation had not only led to a more stable form of differentiation; it had not only accentuated the difference between this world and the other world 'to a far higher degree than had been possible in the Catholic tradition' (1978: 196). This sharpened dualism had in his view also been able to reactivate the *interventionist potentials* inherent in the Christian movement. Unlike Weber, Parsons thus did not believe that the differentiation and specialization of other 'value spheres' marked the start of the rapid de-Christianization of predominant worldviews. In his view, the religiously sanctioned, highly critical this-worldly orientation of Protestant Christianity did not go at the cost of religious concerns. It did not create 'problems of meaning' that could not be solved by the value sphere of religion. Rather, 'the more important change was ... the endowment of secular life with a new order of religious legitimation as a field of "Christian opportunity"' (1967: 404). This was possible because the Protestants, notably the Calvinistic-Puritan ones, put much stress on the role of human agency in creating the Holy Community. Differentiation *from* the world here was the condition for intensified commitment *in* the world. For 'the typical ascetic Protestant' (1978: 196), theology gave central importance to the idea of a divinely ordained mission for man, of a long-term effort to 'do His will' and build His Kingdom on earth. For him or her, secular society became increasingly accepted as a religiously legitimate field of action.[3]

On this basis, Parsons also criticized the 'symbioses' of church and state, which had emerged in a number of European countries in the aftermath of the Reformation. Parsons argued in favour of the strict separation of state and church, and against the formation of Protestant state churches (1967: 410–12). Despite the religiously grounded emphasis on the difference between the 'divine mission' and the 'human condition', he maintained, *dedifferentiation* had occurred in some (especially Lutheran) wings of Protestantism, thereby 'severely compromising the religious potential for reconstructing the secular world' (1978: 195). Unlike Weber, Parsons thus also believed that the differentiation of religion could serve to counter or remedy the centrifugal tendencies inherent within increasingly differentiated societies.

On this basis, Parsons moreover questioned several viewpoints raised by the secularization theories of his time (e.g. Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1991; see also Vanderstraeten, 2015a). For him, modernization did not irrevocably lead to religious decline. He rather tried to make sense of the 'survival' of religion in the New World – long before debates in sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular started to focus upon 'American exceptionalism'. Parsons saw the genesis of 'a further phase [in the relation between cultural and social systems] which has come to maturity in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries, most conspicuously in the United States' (1967: 412). In this light, he also provided his own idiosyncratic definition of secularization.

> The concept [secularization] has ... been widely interpreted to mean a one-way change, namely the sacrifice of religious claims, obligations and commitments, in favor of secular interests. The other possibility, however, should not be forgotten, namely that the secular order may change in the direction of closer approximation of the normative models provided by a religion, or by religion more generally. (1978: 240)

For Parsons, Christianity remained closely intertwined with the American variant of 'the developmental process'.

While Parsons highlighted in this context that he did '*not* assert that on religious grounds alone the development that took place in America was inevitable', he also stressed that 'the religious system had the *potential* for this development, which was a religiously authentic and legitimate alternative' (1978: 201, his emphases). More particularly, he put emphasis on the genesis of specific structural conditions within the 'new nation'. In his view, the provisions of the first amendment to the American Constitution (separation of church and state, freedom of religion) served to safeguard the differentiation between religion and secular society. At the same time, they allowed for a new synthesis between the two spheres. While 'disestablishment' led to the institutionalization of religious pluralism, it also relegated dogmatically specified expressions of religion to the private sphere. But this privatization of religious decisions – i.e. 'secularization in the usual sense which denied traditional denominational bodies any official status' (1978: 309) – had in the United States been complemented by the sacralization of an integrating, overarching value system for the whole societal system. Drawing on work of his former student Robert Bellah (1970), Parsons argued that the new secular nation had been 'interpreted from the very first canonical document, the Declaration of Independence, to be a sacred entity' (1978: 309). At a highly abstract level, he believed, such a sacred value system could direct and control the choices made within each of the different secular action systems. He therefore also spoke of 'each additional step in secularization, in the sense of the institutionalization of Christian patterns in the secular world' (1978: 261).

Following Parsons, the increasing differentiation of other systems *from* religion was met by processes of differentiation *within* religion. Within the system of religion, he emphasized the development of a distinction 'between the aspect of devotion and worship on the one hand, and the aspect of the Christian's relation to his fellow men on the other' (1967: 393).[4] While the 'Christian community was constituted by the fact of common faith and common worship', there also emerged more generalized religious values which served to bind 'the community [as a whole] together in bonds of human mutuality' (1967: 393; see also Parsons, 2007: 104–5). Parsons saw such ideals of 'brotherly love' being institutionalized in a number of contexts – especially 'in North America, although also in other places' (1978: 199). Like Durkheim, Parsons especially underlined the socially integrative function of religion.

To put it somewhat differently: Parsons emphasized, on the one hand, increasing structural differentiation at the societal level: 'residence, socioeconomic status,

occupation, and political attachment have become increasingly dissociated from religious affiliation and from the ethnic components which have historically been so closely associated with religion' (1978: 204). This differentiation and dissociation of roles made it feasible to separate members and non-members of religious associations without using other roles (e.g. citizenship) as a point of reference. It made it feasible to think of participation in religious associations as a matter of private choice. But the privatization of denominationally specific religious commitments did not have to endanger religion's significance in the American society. Parsons emphasized, on the other hand, that increasing structural differentiation could go along with the generalization of religious values at the level of society. In his view, increasing structural differentiation made it necessary to generalize and 'secularize' the symbolic structures, which could ensure cohesion and 'latent pattern maintenance'. In his idiosyncratic view, 'secularization' had to counter the centrifugal tendencies inherent in a differentiated society. It had to safeguard the 'systemness' of the American society. In this regard, Durkheim clearly provided the analytical tools in Parsons' struggle with Weber. America's *civil religion* was thought to be the source of general images of order and more specific societal values, crucial to maintaining minimal societal coherence (see also Warner, 1993, 1997; Lechner, 1997, 1998; Vanderstraeten, 2002).

Against this background, Parsons claimed on a number of occasions that the adherence to a specific, broadly Christian 'religious' framework of meaning was one of the most distinctive features of the American society of his time. 'In our analytical terms', he stated, 'Calvinism thus gave a religious legitimation to a system-goal for the good society' (1962: 148). He did not argue that modern society was acceptable to Christian ethics in all detail and without any critical reservation. He believed, however, that a consensus was emerging 'on a broad framework of the institutions of the morally acceptable society and on social problems to be solved' (1978: 209). In this regard, Parsons thus remained attached to the Durkheimian idea that religion is society worshipping itself – even if he did not identify the object of worship with the American society as it existed at his time, but with a 'higher reality' that set the standards which the 'new nation' attempted to embody. On this basis, he also speculated about the societal impact of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. He explicitly expressed doubts about the impact of protest movements that aimed at 'rejecting' modern society, but he also saw indications of an 'expressive revolution' at the level of the ultimate value system of modern society (e.g. 1978: 320–2). He pointed to socio-cultural changes that would give way to a greater emphasis on emotions within the modern, American society. At the same time, he was prone to emphasize the *necessity* of a 'systemic' relationship between this 'expressive' counterculture and existing Christian frameworks of meaning. He also saw a clear connection between the expressive revolution and the time-honoured Christian obligation to 'love thy neighbour'. But it might be questioned what purposes the ensuing broad and vague definition of 'religion' (viz., civil religion) served.

Perhaps this broad and vague concept of 'religion' prevented Parsons from questioning the lasting significance and impact of 'religion' in modern society. In his analyses, he could also easily shift from descriptive to prescriptive statements. He did not question that religion could have disintegrative effects, that it could lead to conflicts and confrontations within the societal system. But he also did not hesitate to argue that

religion had to promote the continuity of society, that it had to exclude possibilities disruptive to this system. His theoretical framework highlighted the relation between transitions in the process of differentiation and the genesis of new models of value integration and systemness. For Parsons, however, the production of systemness was also a duty for increasingly complex, differentiated societies. Thus, the boundaries between theology and sociology here ultimately become blurry (see also Vanderstraeten, 2015b).

III

As we have seen, Parsons' analyses built upon a differentiation-theoretical framework. He primarily analysed the changing relationship between Christianity and society in terms of structural or role differentiation. He distinguished between a number of 'phases' – each of which was characterized by its own structural (in)stabilities. Increasing differentiation, however, did not have to threaten the unity of the system as a whole. Parsons' emphasis on structural differentiation was complemented by one on value integration. Especially in the New World, Parsons believed, religion has proved able to deliver uniform definitions of the situation for highly different, highly heterogeneous contexts of action.

The structural constraints of this theoretical framework can now also be seen. In Parsons' interpretation, differentiation leads to differences that did not previously exist. 'It is in the nature of the process of differentiation that what was one part at an earlier stage becomes two or more distinct parts at a later' (1967: 390). But Parsons did not 'really' address the ensuing differences and divergences in his historical-sociological analyses. Like Durkheim, he rather put emphasis on the 'systemness' of the differentiated parts. In the introduction to the second edition of *De la division du travail social*, Durkheim (1930: xix–xx) had already spoken of '*quelques rapports de parenté*' between the main units of traditional and modern societies.[5] For Parsons, too, the relation between the older and the newer units of the societal system was unquestionable. His emphasis was on the unity and continuity of the encompassing system. He spoke of both the 'belongingness of compared items within the same system' and the 'genetic dimension of relatedness' (1977: 283). In this sense, systemness was part of his definition of differentiation. Differentiation and integration were two sides of the same coin; differentiation meant that differentiation and integration were concomitantly promoted. Analyses of different 'stages' or 'phases' in the differentiation process therefore also had to be written as analyses of transitions in integration processes.

For Parsons, as I mentioned before, the task for any sociology of religion that intended to address evolutions of the *longue durée* was 'one of analyzing the continuities, not only of the component called by the same name in the different stages … but also of the senses in which the patterns of orientation given in the earlier stages have or have not been fundamentally altered in their significance for the system as a whole' (1967: 391). We may, however, now conclude that Parsons' historical-sociological analyses primarily departed from the idea that processes of social differentiation had to be controlled and regulated. In his view, processes of differentiation and integration had to reinforce each other in the course of the 'developmental process'. Moreover, as Parsons tended to identify 'religion' with the principle of relatedness and order, with a sacred system of

values that could ensure system integration, increasing differentiation could not but *enforce* the societal relevance of religion. On the basis of the preceding reconstruction of Parsons' later sociology, however, we may question not only the fact that processes of differentiation necessarily have to go along with shifts in the 'patterns of orientation' at the level of 'the system as a whole'. We may also question the fact that the history of the societal significance and impact of religion primarily needs to be understood as a history of patterns of value integration and value generalization.

Parsons, we may conclude, privileged one of the two 'continuities' to which he pointed himself. Especially for the early-modern and modern era, he hardly devoted attention to the differentiation of religion from society. He hardly discussed the specialization of religion within modern society, but rather focused on the requirements of systemic integration. A Durkheimian concern with value integration here thus marginalized a Weberian sensitivity about the differentiation of religion and other 'value spheres'. A concern with systemness here stood in the way of historical-sociological analyses of the specifics of the 'problems of meaning' with which religion is confronted in the New World and elsewhere. In order to contribute to sociology in general and the sociology of religion in particular, it may at present be more productive to invest more effort in analyses of differentiation processes.

Notes

1. Influenced by Max Weber and Karl Jaspers, Parsons favoured a historical and comparative approach to the sociology of religion. In his late work, he briefly discussed the evolutionary potential of alternative conceptions and institutionalizations of transcendence across the so-called 'seedbed societies' in Israel, Greece, China, and India. In general terms, he thereby referred to 'the philosophic breakthroughs to higher levels of generalization in the constitutive symbolic systems of their cultures' (1966b: 70). But his more detailed historical-sociological analyses remained limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition (see also Parsons, 1971).

2. Elsewhere, Parsons argued that the 'monastic movement' led to a differentiation between the regular clergy, which he considered to be 'the true ''upper class'' of the church' (1978: 305), and the secular clergy. In his view, there emerged at that time a two-sided relationship with the laity in the medieval Christian church. While the members of the *secular* clergy were seen as the administrators of the sacraments, and hence as in control of 'the power of the keys' (as Weber also liked to emphasize), no such hierarchical relationship existed between the religious 'upper class' and the laity. For Parsons, as we will see, the relationship between the *regular* clergy and the laity prepared the ground for the elaboration of the Protestant idea of universal priesthood.

3. Weber, by contrast, perceived the Protestant Revolution, especially in its Calvinist-Puritan version, as the start of a general reorientation of Christianity: from an other-worldly to a this-worldly direction. Religious callings were redirected to the secular, this-worldly sphere. Along the same lines, Peter Berger argued at that time that Christianity has been a self-defeating ethic. 'Historically speaking, Christianity has been its own gravedigger' (Berger, 1967: 129). As we will see in more detail, Parsons relied on Durkheim's view on religion/society to counter the pessimistic worldview of Weber and other critics of modernization.

4. Parsons' own self-characterization echoed this analysis; he combined his defence of American institutions with minimal formal religious commitments. In a letter to Eric Voegelin, for example, he described himself as 'by cultural heritage ... a Calvinist' (Parsons and Voegelin, 2013: e36). In the posthumously published, unfinished monograph *American Society*, he also

intertwined his sociological account of the genesis of America's dominant value system with fragments of his own family history (Parsons, 2007; see also Bellah, 2005).

5. The English translation of Durkheim's classic work by W.D. Halls misses the point. '*Quelques rapports de parente*' [i.e. 'some relations of parenthood'] is here translated as 'not wholly unconnected' (1984: xlv). Like Durkheim, Parsons underlined the special, systemic and genetic relations between the differentiated parts of the whole. As a result, he could easily identify the process of differentiation with progress or growth, as well.

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