

2005 SSSR Presidential Address: On Being a Community of Scholars—Practicing the Study of Religion

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Given the opportunity to address this Society, I have chosen to reflect on the work we do together, especially as that work is displayed in our annual gathering. This gathering, like many of the events we study, is a ritual that intensifies and celebrates the “profane” work we do in “ordinary time.”¹ It identifies us to others and to ourselves. And occasionally it allows us to see ourselves in a new light. From scattered locations around the globe, many know us only through our journal, but others—from time to time—participate in the fall meeting that renews and develops the intellectual and social world that defines our work.

I have been a participant observer in these meetings for longer than I like to think about, and I have seen folkways worthy of any obscure cultural group. There are the initiation rituals of neophytes who have to deliver their first paper when they have just learned that their intellectual hero (or nemesis) is sitting in the back row. There are the magical rites performed by scholars who are sure that 20 pages can be delivered in 10 minutes. And there are the pecking orders that can be observed in hallway greetings.² Exploring those folkways might be quite amusing, but my goal here is to take a step back to ask what all those rituals signify—Why does this group gather at all and what does this ritual occasion reveal about how the group is being transformed?

In asking how we are being transformed, I have to confess to an agenda. Both in the observations that follow and in the form they take, I hope to embody and facilitate some of those changes. To state my hope quite clearly—the vitality of this community of scholars will best be fostered by bringing diverse perspectives to a common task. The form of this essay (and of the address on which it is based) is therefore intentional. I asked four friends to help me in reporting on the rituals of this gathering and in reflecting on the identity those rituals celebrate. While each is well-versed in the literatures behind the ideas they are presenting, I asked them to focus especially on what was presented at the meetings instead. Each of them is newer in this “tribe” than I and brings fresher ears to the task, and they represent diverse research interests and diverse ethnic identities. All of us are convinced that no single observer can stand alone to declare what is true about the world. We will come closer to understanding who we are by listening to multiple voices.

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OUR HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Understanding who we are becoming, of course, is aided by attention to who we have been. Like all good modern organizations, this Society has a mission statement. In the second article of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) Constitution, we say that we “seek to promote the study of religions through those disciplines maintaining high academic, professional, and ethical standards as they employ valid and reliable scientific methods in their investigation.” One can hardly miss the descriptors here—academic, professional, valid, reliable, scientific. They nearly overwhelm the object of our study—religions. Like our name itself, this mission statement places us firmly within the “scientific” community, and like the name, there is a hint here of “protesting too much.” When this Society came into being, in 1949, secularization was at its height in the American academy (Smith 2003). Studying religion was seen as at best useless, at worst dangerous. Everyone knew that enlightened knowledge was rapidly replacing benighted superstition. So little wonder that a group formed for the study of religion would go out of its way to say how scientific and academic and professional it was.

Today, the study of religions hardly has to be defended, even if many of our colleagues still devoutly hope that we will one day be put out of business. There is clearly plenty to keep us busy for the foreseeable future, and so in our “ordinary time” we spend hours and days and weeks watching and recording what people do when they are being religious. We ask them questions on surveys and engage them in long conversations. We read the texts their groups produce, and we even listen in on their Internet chats and online rituals.

We come to our work with the advantage of a legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors. It is not so much that they have provided us with a perfectly accurate map of the world in which we are working, but they have given us some fairly important map-making tools. Durkheim insisted that we pay attention to communities and to rituals and to what people express about themselves when they get together for important occasions. Weber taught us to ask about how religious beliefs form a way of life among their adherents, a way of life that can sometimes have unintended consequences. More recently, Berger insisted that we ask about the social relationships and contexts, the plausibility structures, within which that way of life makes sense. And Marx keeps returning from the grave to remind us never to lose sight of questions of power and agency. They may not have gotten all their predictions right, but they taught us how to think, and those questions continue to provide valuable underpinnings for the work we do.

Each of those “founding fathers” was, of course, both European and male. Even as they were writing about the world they saw, other voices were asking other questions. W. E. B. DuBois, for instance, saw better than anyone the double-bind of strong religious communities, offering both inner strength and enforced isolation (Zuckerman 2002). Charlotte Perkins Gilman observed the way religious texts and rituals were used differently by women and men (Gilman 2003). Even our earliest history is more diverse than we sometimes think it is. As an increasingly broad range of voices has joined the conversation, we have begun to hear new questions and see beyond what those earlier European men could see. We have discovered that we need those multiple vantage points, born of different disciplines, different life experiences, and different religious objects of study. Each of these differences has provided us with critical tools for our work.

So we are still studying religions, after all these years. We still want to know who is being religious, how they are doing it, what it means to them, how it changes in different contexts and cultures. Over these last two decades, both our methods and the scope of our inquiries have expanded, as has the audience that finds our work important. The everyday practice of the study of religions employs tools of all sorts, used by scholars of increasing variety, to understand the way people in every corner of the earth form communities of religious practice. In some ways, it is a wonder that we recognize each other as members of a common professional community at all. And yet once a year, we put aside ordinary time to bring our best offerings to share with each other, and in the midst of this intellectual feast there have been hints of the common questions that animate us and glimpses of the way our differences might sharpen the work we do.

Religion and the Individual—Wendy Cadge

There are many ways to address the relationship between religion and the individual but, specifically, I am going to address how we think analytically about the relationship between religion and health. You only have to open a newspaper or magazine recently to see headlines about prayer, health, yoga, and the relationship between spirituality and health. It is clear that there is something taking place culturally, if not physiologically, around these themes.

Thinking about individuals as combinations of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and religious or spiritual, it seems appropriate to begin by observing the ways in which religion influences which individuals are born and how those births take place. Demographers have long told us that religion influences women's and men's sexual behaviors, our willingness to use birth control, and the number of children we have. Religion also influences the process of birth in many ways, including the ceremonies and rituals we engage in around the birth of a child.

Once we have come into the world, religion may influence how healthy we are and remain. A large, primarily quantitative, literature has developed that seeks to document and explain the relationship between religion and health (see Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001, for a recent overview). Numerous papers on the program this year speak to these themes. Jenny Trinitapoli and Robert Crosnoe, for example, examine the relationship between religion, depression, and school context (Trinitapoli and Crosnoe 2005). Other papers consider relationships between religious activity and substance abuse (Steinman, Ferketich, and Sahr 2005), sexual attitudes and behaviors (Edwards et al. 2005), and other measures of physical and mental health among children and adults.

Some of the most interesting and promising research in this area tries to open up questions about the relationship between religion and health by refusing to allow either religion or health to be a concept in a black box that cannot be explored. A paper by Kathleen Galek on the program this year, for example, opens the religion box by trying to operationalize individuals' templates of God (Galek 2005). She can then explore how different conceptions influence mental health. Marie Griffith approaches religion historically in her new book, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Griffith 2004). She and the respondents who commented on her book explored the ways Christians have thought about the physical body, dieting, appearance, fitness, and related topics. Health itself is seen, they note, through both religious and gendered lenses.

Studies about religion and the health of individuals would be enriched by further interdisciplinary conversations, of the sort this meeting fosters, that focus on what the concepts of religion and health describe and if they are helpful analytically. Is there something called "religion" that can be measured in a survey or tweaked to apply to different religious traditions? Is such an operationalization helpful? Does it help us analytically in understanding health?

Interdisciplinary and intercultural conversations would also help to contextualize our understanding of religion and health. How do the answers people give to questions about their religions and their health vary, for instance, based on whether they are at home, at the doctor's office, or at a religious center? How does the religious history of a country or particular group influence how people hear these questions and what options are available to them in response? How are biomedical and religious discourses around health mingling in the United States presently, and how and why is this taking place? And what is "health" anyway? One of the first things we want students in medical sociology courses to understand is the socially constructed nature of that concept. Those who study religion and health should be no less critical.

I see enormous potential for expanding research about religion and health as we move beyond the relatively narrow set of analytic and methodological tools traditionally used in this research area. Anthropologists, religious studies scholars, and some physicians are enlarging the conversation by looking across religious and cultural traditions and in different institutional contexts to better understand the concepts of religion and health and the relationship between them

(for example, Barnes and Sered 2004). I am encouraged by studies that attempt to place individuals in their religious, familial, nation-state, and other social contexts rather than looking at them in isolation. On the program this year, Korie E. Edwards and colleagues, for example, examine the relationship between religion and the sexual behaviors of youth, but do so by asking specifically about African-American youth and the African-American churches in which they participate (Edwards et al. 2005). Chris Ellison and colleagues move outside the United States to examine the relationship between religious involvement and mental health in Taiwan. While their work is not explicitly comparative, it points to the possibilities and insights to be gained from comparative work (Ellison, Zhai, and Fan 2005).

There is much to be learned about how the cultural and institutional contexts in which we find ourselves influence what we think health is, how we think about our physical, emotional, and intellectual selves, and what we expect in terms of our health, our religions or gods, and the relationship between the two. This is a rich area for research—all of which will much better represent our complicated realities if researchers think creatively and continue to work in the interdisciplinary contexts these meetings foster and encourage.

Emotion, Experience, and Revelation in Religious Lives—Ammerman

Attention to the embodied reality of human life is a welcome and growing part of our conversation in these meetings. What has long been here, as well, is attention to human beings as feeling and experiencing beings, whose inner dynamics are a vital part of the story of religious life. Glen Moriarty notes, for instance, that the quality of interpersonal relationships, especially with significant caregivers, often shapes the sort of divine-human relationship patients in therapy are able to experience (Moriarty 2005). And Andrew Village notes that psychological types (like the Myers-Briggs categories) affect how people read scripture (Village 2005b). Many of the contributions at these meetings have included analyses of God images, their antecedents, and effects. Mandy Robbins, for instance, found that a loving God image is related to a more positive self-concept and that a more positive self-concept is related to higher levels of empathy (Robbins 2005). How people experience the divine is related to the psychological and interpersonal dynamics of people's lives.

Robbins's study and several of the others presented at these meetings are notable for taking the question of God images across national boundaries—in this case into South Africa. In the past, too much of this work remained confined primarily to Christian populations in the developed West. As we are able to take variations in culture and religious tradition into account, we can learn even more about how ways of thinking and feeling affect and are affected by other aspects of the human experience.

How human beings affect and are affected by their sacred scriptures has been another of the welcome conversations at these meetings. I want to publicly thank the emissaries from the Society for Biblical Literature who ventured into our alien territory to talk with us about how scripture is made, used, and understood in the various human communities in which it is found. No less than any other part of the religio-social world, scriptural texts are critical sites of social scientific inquiry. That we have relegated their study to members of another guild has made our own understanding of religious life poorer. It is commonplace, for instance, for biblical studies scholars to pay attention to what they call "horizons of interpretation," and by that they mean something imminently social. Using that concept, Village presented a paper here looking at how readers in different sorts of religious communities read the same New Testament text (Village 2005a). In other words, he took a concept from biblical studies into the social science terrain. Equally fruitful—going in the opposite disciplinary direction—is Carrie Miles's appropriation of Becker's economic theory of the family to understand injunctions about wifely submission in the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians (Miles 2005). And effectively working both sides of the disciplinary street, Jaime Clark-Soles introduces us to the unexpected parallels among the community in which the Gospel of John emerged, the ancient Jewish Qumran community, and

the Branch Davidians, thereby drawing out new insight into how sectarian groups use scripture (Clark-Soles 2005).

The risk of this sort of disciplinary excursion, of course, is that boundary crossers will be accused of not knowing the territory. But for every rock they stumble over, we are likely to get at least a gem or two of new inspiration. I am more than willing both to welcome some “illegal immigrants” and to encourage the people who think they are “natives” to enlarge their scope of inquiry. Only when the disciplinary natives and the immigrants actually talk to each other do they discover the tools and habits each may need for their work. Whether it is the nature and use of scriptural texts, or a fine-grained reading of a religious ritual, or attention to the experiential side of religion, we lose a full accounting of our subject if we relegate these topics to those in other guilds. While the discipline of “religious studies” has always claimed to be interdisciplinary, the reality of the huge professional guild it has become is that each discipline is divided and subdivided so that those who study one Gospel never talk to anyone who studies one of the other Gospels, never mind talking to an anthropologist or economist or psychologist about how a given text might be analyzed. We have the wonderful luxury of being no one’s job market, of coming together simply to explore our common curiosities.

The boundaries we are crossing are not just disciplinary, however. I can remember not many years ago looking out over a SSSR audience and being appalled at its whiteness. Of course, I can also remember when you could get all the SSSR women around one good-sized lunch table! We have not exactly arrived at a full rainbow of inclusion, but we are in considerably better shape than we were only a few years ago. And that diversity of people has also enriched the subjects we address and the way we address them.

Understanding Difference, Understanding Religion, Understanding Society—Milagros Peña

One of the reasons we no longer find ourselves defending the sociological study of religion is that questions about religion so clearly intersect with every other area of sociology. Our field is more than simply making links between religious attitudes and social behavior; and the effects of growing religious diversity in the United States brought by recent immigration are more than simply coming to see ourselves in others. More important, what I see in this conference is a reminder that doing sociology of religion is also doing political, economic, environmental, and other sociologies. To me this point is not only an important reminder for us as sociologists of religion but for the larger discipline of sociology, and something to emphasize to our students. As scholars of religion, we are not just bringing knowledge to the field that will raise awareness and promote tolerance for difference; we are raising critical sociological questions important to other fields of sociology.

For example, Ellison and McDaniel presented a paper on “religion, race/ethnicity, and environmental concern” and stressed that understanding the relationship between religion and environmental attitudes requires asking the question within specific ethnic contexts (Ellison and McDaniel 2005). That is, what is arguably the most theoretically important and empirically consistent religious predictor of environmental concern—conservative biblical interpretation (variously gauged in terms of literalism or inerrancy)—may be linked with environmental attitudes differently for African Americans, and perhaps Hispanics, as compared with non-Hispanic whites. Links between religion and social attitudes are differently constructed in different ethnic communities.

Other analyses challenge the theorizing on religion that makes outmoded assumptions about where religion may (and may not) be found. Most notably, the work of John Schmalzbauer concludes that “the resurgence of religion on campus is made possible by the advent of post-modernism/post-positivism and a growing openness to religion in American public life” (Schmalzbauer 2005). In another paper, Sean Everton challenges political scientists’ perceptions that American public life has become the domain of the Religious Right (Everton 2005). Everton

shows that Christian conservatives are not as politically active as many believe and that black Protestants are in fact the most politically active religious group. His research even shows that John Kerry and John Edwards appeared and spoke at far more churches than did their Republican counterparts. Neither college campuses nor political campaigns are devoid of religion, but if we think we know what kind of religion we will find there, we should be careful to test our assumptions.

The particular meaning of “conservative” and “liberal” is also shaped by the specific religious contexts in which it is defined. Here I note Roger Dudley’s contribution to this conference in his paper “Politics, Public Issues, and Religiosity: Seventh-Day Adventists in 2004” (Dudley 2005). His analysis of a random sample of 860 American Seventh-Day Adventists challenges the conservative/liberal continuum. He notes the not-so-straightforward connection between religious conservative attitudes and conservative politics. Seventh-Day Adventists were shown to be conservative on public issues but more moderate on concerns affecting the relationship of the church and the state. “Conservative” has neither a universal political meaning nor a universal religious meaning. If religious groups are critical contexts for working out such political definitions, then how ought political sociologists to go about their work? Attention to religious differences suggests broader theoretical and empirical questions for the field.

Similarly, broad theoretical questions can help us understand religious differences. Analysis of global Pentecostalism is deepened by attention to the general questions raised by globalization theory. Michael Wilkinson uses theoretical findings from this larger framework to research the conservative/liberal continuum and its socio-cultural significance for Pentecostalism in global society (Wilkinson 2005).

Therefore, I leave this conference with a sense that the many differences in what we study and how we study it are both grounded in and contributing to the classic questions in sociology. Though we may appear to outsiders to be focused on the exotic or the esoteric, our research cuts across topical boundaries to address core questions. The papers presented here underscore this point. No matter how different our topics, research questions, or approaches, the study of religion is squarely in the mix, contributing to sociology’s understanding of how society works.

Religious Organizations in Comparative Context—Ammerman

One of the things that is very clear is that this group spends a good deal of its time and energy trying to understand the various organizational dynamics that structure religious experience and practice for much of the population. The long-time partnership between SSSR and the Religious Research Association has meant that students with an eye on congregations, denominations, seminaries, and the like would be present at these meetings. They remind us that even in the midst of a fluid religious milieu, in which individuals often mix and match and create their own religious expressions, religious organizations nevertheless are primary carriers of traditions.³ For instance, Sarah Bänziger reported that in the very secular Netherlands, 58 percent of those who are not affiliated with a church say they also never pray, while only 7 percent of those who are members of the churches say they never pray (Bänziger 2005). Prayer persists among many nonchurchmembers, often in new forms, but prayer is a nearly universal part of the culture transmitted and supported by the churches. Similarly, while examining the presumed conflict between science and religion, Elaine Howard Ecklund and Jerry Park found that the best predictor of what scientists think about that conflict is neither their scientific credentials nor their individual spirituality, but which religious tradition they do or do not affiliate with (Ecklund and Park 2005). Religious organizations remain extremely important sites of religious activity, shaping how people think and what spiritual practices are part of their lives.

But understanding religious organizations is helped when we put them in comparative perspective. Mitsutoshi Horii, for instance, has provided us with a fascinating look at Buddhist priests in contemporary Japan (Horii 2005). The Japanese situation makes very clear that

religious leaders exist in a legal, familial, and economic context. As in most places in the world, I suspect, governments have ways of classifying and counting both religious professionals and religious organizations; and those counting schemes make a difference.⁴ At one point, in the 17th century, all of Japan was organized into Buddhist “parishes,” and every person in the population was enrolled and reported on through the local temples. Today, the priests and the temples are still there, but priests are largely the hereditary residents of the temple, have been dubbed “directors” by the government, and have very little in the way of “religious” duties to keep them busy. Religious teaching is done elsewhere and mostly by people who are technically lay people. Political, familial, and economic forces—often ignored when we stay within a single cultural context—have fundamentally changed one religious role, while other religious leaders have emerged elsewhere.

That last point about shifting locations is relatively undeveloped in Horii’s paper, however. That priests have been displaced from former roles is largely taken as a sign of decline, rather than change. That observation might have been raised, interestingly, by conversation with Milagros Peña and her colleagues about Latino seminarians in the United States or with Dean Hoge and Aniedi Okure about the presence of international Catholic priests in U.S. parishes, just as those authors might have benefited by Horii’s close attention to legal definitions. Both of these U.S. papers address the dynamic character of religious leadership, something American scholars tend to take for granted. As one institutionalized pattern changes, others have emerged. Latino seminarians are responding to the growth of the immigrant community in the United States and the emergence of many new Protestant congregations in that community. They are shaping their role in close connection with the needs and expectations in that community, for instance, often going to school part-time and actively working in social service activities (Peña et al. 2005). International priests are a response, among other things, both to immigrant diversity and to the relative shortage of homegrown priests. One of the things Hoge and Okure ask is how we might think about the global economic pressures and consequences of this flow of religious professionals across national borders (Hoge and Okure 2005). They suggest that other students of religious professionals ought to pay attention to these global economic currents, even as they look for religious innovation within existing traditions.

Paying attention to political and economic forces shaping religious organizations should not, however, be done in the absence of attention to the way those organizations themselves shape political and economic realities. For instance, Arthur Brooks shows us that religious charitable giving does not respond to the differences in the giver’s tax constraints in the way that giving to “big box” charities like United Way does (Brooks 2005). However, having made that very helpful observation, his economic theory is incomplete without the insights of those who explore the organizational culture of religious organizations. They would note that the context in which people are making decisions about religious giving is simply quite different from the context in which we make decisions about the United Way. Again, organizational culture matters.

Religion Across Institutional Boundaries

If there is one center of gravity in our work as students of religion, it is the intersection between “religion” and other social institutions—whether governments and their tax policies or schools, politics, the media, or health care. Often in the past our exploration of these questions was shaped by an underlying functionalist assumption that modern societies produce differentiated institutional arenas, along with a secularization assumption that in such societies religion is likely to be on the losing end of the competition among those social arenas. Increasingly, however, we are recognizing the very permeable character of the boundaries around all of our presumably differentiated institutions, as well as the contingent character of the influences that pass back and forth among them.⁵ Faced with institutional and cultural pluralism, modern social actors still seem to use religious identities and symbols to make sense of everything from migration to family life to civic

life.⁶ In no case are other social realities absent. Economic pressures, legal requirements, political resources, even individual skills and predispositions shape action; but so do religious prescriptions and narratives. To say that meanings and strategies of action are being negotiated is to recognize that there are always multiple and overlapping layers in our social worlds. Not all situations are equally infused with spiritual options, but we would miss important dimensions in everyday action if we assumed religion's absence whenever we see secular strategies at work. Across all sorts of institutional domains, we would do well to ask both whether and how religious action may be present.

One of the most common sites we have been examining in recent years is the territory between religion and economy. Some among us have been asking how various aspects of religion affect economic behavior, while others have wondered how economic reasoning may be seen in religious beliefs and practices.

Religion and Economics—Robert D. Woodberry

One of the most exciting trends in the social scientific study of religion is the rapid increase in interest in religion and economics. SSSR has always been a diverse group. The largest group is sociologists, but there are strong contingents from religious studies, political science, and psychology. However, until recently, the discipline of economics has been represented by just a few people, such as Charles Zech, Greg Krohn, and especially Larry Iannaccone. Of course, the Iannaccone approach to religious economies had some noneconomist fellow travelers such as Roger Finke, Rodney Stark, and Tony Gill, and an assortment of other noneconomists did various tests of the Weber thesis. But Larry Iannaccone was one of the very few SSSR members who worked in an economics department.

The major early contribution of economics to the social scientific study of religion was the use of market theory and club theory to help understand religious groups. Although this approach has created controversy and spurred some vocal critics, it has had a profound impact on our discipline. Social science papers on religion now often refer to "rational choice," "religious markets," "the free-rider problem," "strictness," and "religious competition." Although many scholars still look for evidence of secularization, our ideas about what secularization is and how it occurs have been shaped by the economic approaches introduced by Iannaccone and his colleagues. Unfortunately, there seemed to be little influence in the other direction, that is, influence from SSSR on what was written and thought in economics.

However, the gulf between the academic study of religion and of economics is rapidly disappearing. Since the birth of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture (ASREC) in 2002, the SSSR meetings have had scores of economists and papers on religion and economic issues.⁷ The flowering of the study of religion and economics is partially a result of the hard work and scholarship of people like Larry Iannaccone and funding from the John Templeton Foundation, but it also reflects broad trends in economic theory. Economists have increasingly become interested in long-term cultural and institutional factors that influence corruption rates, the rule of law, protection of property rights, investment in mass education, the efficiency of government, and various economically friendly institutions. In addition, mainstream economists have begun using economic models to understand other aspects of everyday life. Both these trends have opened the way for serious studies of religion.

Thus ASREC/SSSR has attracted some of the world's leading economists, including Nobel laureate Gary Becker, Robert Barro, and Ed Glasser. But it has also attracted dozens of economics graduate students, and that suggests a healthy future for the field. This new crop of scholars is introducing new economic tools for understanding religion, such as the game theory, and the industrial organization theory. But they are also using religion as an important factor in

explaining economically relevant outcomes. Thus, there is now an exchange, not just a one-way communication.

Of course, whenever people move into new fields, problems develop. Some noneconomists appropriate economic models in sloppy ways; some economists describe religious groups based more on formal modeling than on empirical evidence or the lived experience of religious practitioners. Some simplifications may make those on the other side wince. But other economists, like Timur Kuran, Gary Richardson, and Sriya Iyer, are doing careful, nuanced analyses of how religious institutions and beliefs shape economic change in particular contexts. For example, Timur Kuran shows how Islamic inheritance law and charitable trusts (*waqf*) worked efficiently in one economic context, but later hampered the development of joint stock corporations (Kuran 2005). Gary Richardson shows how the rise of belief in purgatory had the unintended consequence of reducing the free-rider problem and enabling the rise of guilds (Richardson 2004). Sriya Iyer looks at religious differences in overcoming caste discrimination in India and how this should shape Indian government policy (Iyer, Borooah, and Dubey 2005). These scholars have the historical depth and detailed knowledge of religious traditions to please religion specialists, and the economic sophistication to impress those in their own discipline.

Another problem when scholars from different fields come together is translation—we have been trained in different environments with different vocabulary, different methods and statistical procedures, different questions, and different sensitivities. We each need to learn to communicate in ways that those in other fields can understand. We need to listen carefully and ask questions to understand fully what others say. But those of us who have ventured over to the ASREC sessions have been amply rewarded with an intellectual feast that outweighs figuring out a few new terms and theoretical approaches.

That is what is most exciting about the rapid rise of economics in the SSSR: the possibilities for creative work that it engenders. The SSSR is one of the few places where scholars from such diverse disciplines regularly interact. We all bring different questions, theoretical approaches, methods, and areas of expertise. This conjunction creates wonderful possibilities to improve each other's work and to take back new perspectives and techniques to our respective disciplines. Noneconomists can learn new statistical procedures and theoretical approaches from economists; economists can learn more nuanced and historically accurate understandings of religion and its influence on society. Like the theory of comparative advantage suggests, through free exchange, we all come away with something more.

Religion and Politics—Omar M. McRoberts

While Bob Woodberry has observed instances of cross-pollination between economics and religion at these meetings, I have watched those parts of our “ritual” that reflect a concern for the interaction of religion with political processes and states. The presence of political scientists and political sociologists at these gatherings is not so new. Yet I am struck by how this area in particular tends to bring the winds of global current events into our midst. So many papers presented in this general area are inspired by ongoing political battles and reconfigurations. We might say, then, that we have been receiving pollen from outside our scholarly association as well as enjoying cross-pollination within it.

We are no longer under the same pressure as in previous decades to justify why we study religion, at least in part because religion and religious ideas are emerging all over the world and often having an effect on politics. Certainly in the United States, religion has become an undeniably pivotal factor in politics, movement formation, and state development. Here I highlight two main areas of research in this vein, as represented in these meetings.

First, there have been many papers on the relationship between religion and political opinion or political thought. Might religious commitment lead to higher presidential approval ratings (Warber and Olson 2005)? How do religious ideas affect this particular form of political evaluation? Or,

what about movement organizations and leaders like Sojourners and its founder Jim Wallis, who confess evangelical forms of Christianity, yet oppose the political, social welfare, and civil religious visions of a George W. Bush (Wills 2005)? Where has this combination of religious and political ideas come from?

A second major theme concerns religious institutional interaction with the state. A most promising line of inquiry within this theme considers how the state alters, manipulates, and even constitutes the arena within which religious groups operate and compete. One paper presented at these meetings asks, for example, whether state repression of religion in China has actually fed sectarian trends (Lu and Lang 2005). From a position in one political economy, it is often easier to see the effects of the state on religion in other parts of the world, so comparative research and conversation is essential.

It is clear that the programs of research on both of these major themes are partly driven by the immediacy of the issues in question. Rather than being merely “hot topics,” though, these are *vital* topics. This work is timely—so much so that I wonder if it can be brought to bear more frequently and effectively in the arenas that are the object of study. Just as this Society enacts, at its best, an openness to cross-pollination between disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical stances, we may also be in a position to turn our studies outward so as to affect the way religion is understood in politics and government.⁸ This kind of translation and dissemination ultimately could make a significant difference in the outcome of political episodes where religion, or at least talk about religion and morality, is pivotal.

As we think about moments of internal scholarly cross-pollination, and as we acknowledge the impact of current political events and trends on what we study, we might also consider how to position ourselves, with the institutional support of SSSR, to bring our research to bear on current events. We would do so not with the aim of becoming “hot” in a public way, or of making religion “hotter.” Religion cannot get any hotter. Rather we would foreground the purpose that motivates so many of us to study these matters with scientific discipline and tenacity—that purpose is to improve societies through right understanding.

Conclusion—Ammerman

What might we draw out of this ethnographic excursion into our own backyard? The range and diversity of people and subjects represented in any SSSR meeting provides compelling evidence of a scholarly community that is thriving at least in part because it has a subject that is far bigger than any single theory or faction can comprehend. A fully satisfying picture of religion as a social phenomenon requires some of what ethnographers have to offer and some of what we learn from surveys, some of what practitioners understand and some of the wisdom of outsiders, some of what economists can contribute and some of what social historians know. Each discipline has other places in which to hone its particular theories and methods down to a fine edge, but in this community it is the disciplinary boundary-crossers who should be our heroes and heroines. This community works best when we are confronted with questions and data and ways of knowing that we find frankly strange.

This community also works best when the assumptions of any given culture are questioned by the perspectives from other cultures. Far too much of what we think we know about “religion” is still shaped by a world in which white Christian men assumed their experience was the pinnacle of human history from which universal theorizing could proceed. It is likely to be a fairly messy way forward as we leave those neat universal theories behind, but I am convinced that this community is at its best when it is listening to the questions that come from Japanese Buddhism, or Latina Protestantism, or the indigenous churches of southern Africa, or the practices of people who claim no official religion as their own. Practicing the study of religion not only requires a willingness to entertain multiple methods, but also a willingness to listen to multiple voices.

What holds us together? We find the study of religion fascinating. And, I would suggest that beyond our sheer intellectual curiosity, many of us also believe that what we do is important. We believe that understanding religion matters, that what we are talking about is not esoteric trivia. The more we look at religion's nondisappearance, the more we recognize that this is a social reality whose power often transforms individual and collective life—for good and for ill. Understanding that power matters. Telling a full and coherent and wise story about religion matters. And getting that story straight requires that we diligently listen to the many different griots whose tales are part of the community's lore. They will be found in different places, in different traditions, in different disciplines, and in different parts of society. We will certainly not hear any single plot, but with luck we will discover the places where strands of the story overlap and create bridges, where new possibilities emerge in the telling.

NOTES

1. Here, of course, I extend ideas that come to us especially through Durkheim (1964; see also Bellah 2003). The reference to "ordinary time" is a play on the season in the Christian calendar that extends for nearly half the year from Pentecost to Advent.
2. I am indebted to William Foote Whyte for first inspiring me to think about the "tribal ritual" character of professional meetings (Whyte 1981).
3. The fluidity has been emphasized by many, including Roof (1999) and Hammond (1992).
4. This is an example, of course, of the coercive isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).
5. I have explored these themes elsewhere (Ammerman 2003, 2006).
6. Among the many sources that could be cited, on migration, see Levitt (2006); on family, see Edgell (2005), and on civic life see Lichterman (2006).
7. ASREC meets in conjunction with SSSR.
8. Scholars of new religious movements, for instance, have been exemplary in bringing research to bear on legal debates and social policy regarding the regulation of these movements.

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