Reading assignment: *Methodological perspectives* - Stark 281b-283, 1-24

I. Finke & Starke – Methodology (281-3; 1-24)

A. Churching of America – goal – explain why America went from nation where most didn’t belong to church to one where most people do. Approach – Dispute common views about American religion:

1. The portrayal of American religious history as sudden shifts where religiousness rises or falls based on cultural crises & social concerns is rejected by F & S
   a) American religiousness is slow trend from 1776 to 1926
   b) Sudden shifts do occur involving rise and fall of specific religious groups, not in religion per se.

2. False depiction of mainline Protestants as winners & sectarians as either failing or being subsumed into mainline churches.

3. Sect-church process & religious economies is primary dynamic.

B. Rational Choice Theory as theoretical basis to explain religious successes

1. Sect-church process related to choices humans make about religion
   a) Humans want potent religion - miracles, order and sanity
   b) Religious groups that maximize desired aspects in religion also demand more from individual participants of the religion
   c) Over time, religious adherents backslide due to demands of religion, forcing leaders to reduce the demands of religious faith.
   d) Eventually, the lessened demands of religious faith leads to worldliness of its adherents and less rewards, thus less members.

C. Church-Sect Typology


2. Church-sect typology – method of examining the development of religious movements (originally Protestant Christianity) along a continuum in terms of their degree of complexity and relationship to society.
a) Sect – initial countercultural religious group, often breaking away from institutional religious group or church. Exhibits following characteristics:

(1) Charismatic leadership
(2) Countercultural
(3) Egalitarian – often allows women & marginalized others to lead.
(4) Emphasis on gifts (charismata) rather than formal education.
(5) Otherworldly character
(6) Eschatological/apocalyptic character
(7) Sometimes lower socioeconomic status

b) Church type characteristics:

(1) Emphasis on religious roles/offices.
(2) Educated/paid clergy.
(3) Formal liturgy and religious practices.
(4) Move away from spiritual gifts.
(5) Accommodates society
(6) Worldliness or greater concern with present world, rather than world to come.
(7) Greater emphasis on Christ as a model rather than savior
(8) Emphasis on orthodox doctrine as criterion for membership.

D. Routinization of the charismata – the move toward institutionalization (White 366-368)

1. First generation of sect led by charismatic leader exhibiting above characteristics.

2. Second generation of sect – leaders are trained and appointed by original charismatic leader, recounting founding narratives with many members remembering excitement of the earliest days of sect.

3. Third generation of sect – begin to standardize leadership in the form of roles/offices. Increase in hierarchy, training for roles, more accommodation to culture and formalization of religious practices, limiting of women in leadership roles.

E. Cyclical nature of church-sect typology in American Protestant churches – sects evolve into institutional churches (denominations) until dissatisfied church members arise insisting on return to founding vision, break away from the church, and form new sect.

F. Finke & Stark’s Thesis: Churching of America achieved by aggressive churches focused on otherworldliness (1). American religion is history of human actions & organizations, not history of ideas. Religious organization thrives when it has theology that comforts souls and motivates sacrifice. (8)
G. Method – Use economic language to explain sect system & churching of America

H. Influences on American Religion:

1. Voluntary principle – churches not supported by the state. Result: Growth of sects; religious zeal of clergy, support for separation of church & state.

2. Sects – religious freedom stimulated evangelical activity

I. Religious economies – use of marketing language to measure success of American churches. Justification – churches competed for members due to voluntarism:

1. Factors that shape success of churches:
   a) Organizational structure
   b) Clergy (sales representatives)
   c) Product (character of spiritual focus, e.g. intense spiritual demands)
   d) Marketing techniques (style of worship).

2. F & S: when religious groups modernized doctrines & embraced temporal values, they declined.


4. F & S: pluralism or religious diversity that caters to needs of specific groups (market segments) is the natural state of religion (sect groups).

5. F & S – state regulation changes incentives for clergy (11). With state support, clergy becomes lethargic but voluntarism encourages competition for adherents.


J. Sources for research – statistical records of churches, Census Bureau records, private organizations’ records (13).

K. Factors which impact data collection:

1. Claims of religious affiliation often based on recollections of family preferences (14).

2. National rate of religious adherence – 45%

3. Census bureau stats date back to 1850s (16).
4. Obstacles for comparing Census and church data:
   a) Church membership censuses prior to 1890 lacked membership numbers (16).
   b) Membership standards were not comparable across denominational lines (e.g. infant baptism vs. profession of faith).
   c) Difficulty in finding comparable data after 1936 when censuses stopped collecting data on religion (18).

5. Number of organizations, value of property, and seating capacity was used as criteria for assessing membership numbers prior to 1890 (18).

6. Sources – Atlas of Historical Geography; publications on colonial clergy compiled from old documents, diaries, newspapers (19) dating to 1775.

L. 1776-1980 The Churching of America – Finke & Starke

1. Eve of Revolution (c. 1776) – 17% of Americans were churched
2. Start of Civil War (c. 1860) – 37% of Americans churched (22).
3. End of Civil War (c. 1870) – 35% of Americans churched.
4. Before WWI (c. 1906) – 51% of Americans churched.
5. 1926 – 56%.
6. 1980 – 62%.
7. Key questions – why did rate rise, which denominations contributed to increase in religious adherence and which denominations didn't benefit? (23)

8. Weaknesses in F & S’s methodology:
   a) Can numbers accurately assess religious adherence?
   b) What factors challenge accuracy based on verbal acknowledgment of allegiance to a given faith (people’s need to look good)?
   c) In the current setting many people consider themselves Christians but don’t have affiliation with a particular church.
   d) Very selective in their historical review of certain groups, ignoring some while extensively covering others.
   e) Underlying views of sect-typology fail to accurately reflect the many exceptions to their typological rules, (e.g. religious groups among minorities often combine aspects of sect-church typology, even after institutionalization due to their status in the majority society.)

M. Competing methodologies:

1. *F & S* – sociology of religion approach that emphasizes the function of religion in groups, using statistics as criteria of success. The examination of religious ideas is secondary to its assessment as a gauge of numerical success.

2. Bellah – sociological/ideological approach that compares prevalent historical ideas in and beyond their setting to determine ways that American religious ideas have been shaped by historical and economic views.

3. Noll – church history approach emphasizes major ideas, events, and individuals as the impetus for the rise and decline of the church.

II. “Is There a Common American Culture?” – Robert Bellah

A. Powerful institutional order gives rise to powerful common culture (614)

1. American culture based on utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism (Bellah 616) (market society & influences from Romanticism)

2. Three primary mediators of common American culture – market economy, mass media, and mass education (617).

B. American religious tradition is sectarian rather than an established church (based on voluntarism, Bellah 617). Historical lineage:

1. Baptists & Quakers – absolute centrality of religious freedom, sacredness of individual conscience re religious beliefs (617)

2. Georg Jellinek – source of notions of human rights derives from radical sects of Protestant Reformation (Bellah 618)

3. Max Weber – personal right of the governed guarantees freedom from compulsion, especially from state. Later, right to pursue personal economic interests joined with right of freedom from compulsion (Bellah 618).

C. Primary American origin of sectarian notion of sacredness of conscience derives from Baptist Roger Williams (along with multiculturalism) (Bellah 618).

D. Passage of First Amendment to the constitution depended on alliance between Enlightenment Deists like Jefferson and Madison & sectarians to safeguard individual conscience (Bellah 619).

E. Report of Congress in 1810 argued that laws prohibiting government from providing mail service on Sunday discriminated against irreligious people (619).
Phillip Hammond argues that sacred center of American society has moved from churches to the judiciary (emphasizes the singular significance of individual conscience (Bellah 620).

The dangers of lack of balance between sacredness of the individual and concern for the common good is illustrated in example of Roger Williams who was divisive and never satisfied with others (Bellah 622).

This view can be mirrored in emphasis on individual freedom to degree in which wealth becomes concentrated in smaller minority, e.g., the market determines individual lives (Bellah 623).

Need to keep the profit principle/market ideology from destroying the moral foundations of the nation (Bellah 624).

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Bellah’s discussion (which is also sociological in nature) compare and contrast with Finke & Stark’s use of market language to explain the development of the American church?
2. What does Bellah’s article tell us about the ideas & concepts that shaped American religion?
3. How do these factors impact our understanding of the ways that religion & culture merged to form the nation?
4. How do we see evangelicals who insist on constitutionalism merging utilitarianism & economic self-interest in an almost religious insistence?

For Further Reading:


