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The Handbook is not free of errors, but what mistakes there are, are my responsibility
and mine alone.
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In the present age, engaging effectively in identifying, articulating, and elucidating the dynamics of religion involves the development of a less institutional and more organic concept of religion, and the use of a more global framework. This is the main challenge for the contemporary sociology of religion, the effect of which will be to transform the approach to the study of religion from a discipline largely informed by Western notions of religion derived from the study of Christianity, and Western interests, into one driven by a more rounded cross-culturally relevant understanding of the phenomenon. This article describes the new religious vitality, religious pluralism, and social harmony, and the political management of religion. It also suggests that taking a more organic view of religion has implications for methodology in the sociology of religion, necessitating a greater use of ethnography and qualitative methods generally.

Keywords: religious vitality, religious pluralism, social harmony, organic religion, sociology of religion

In the present age, engaging effectively in identifying, articulating, and elucidating the dynamics of religion involves the development of a less institutional and more organic concept of religion, and the use of a more global framework. This is the main challenge for contemporary sociology of religion, the effect of which will be to transform the approach to the study of religion from a discipline largely informed by Western notions of religion derived from the study of Christianity, and Western interests, into one driven by a more rounded cross-culturally relevant understanding of the phenomenon.

It is of pressing concern that the sociology of religion embraces a wider range of issues, including cognitive science's understanding of religious development, the changing character of secularization, the emergence of new forms of religious transmission and of religious pluralism and diversity and their impact on social harmony—not necessarily by any means a zero-sum situation—and on the formulation and public expression of truth
claims. Increasingly relevant to an understanding of the dynamics of religion in society is research on the contest between governments and radicals to control religion, and the strategies put in place by the former to ensure that disaffected second and later generations of immigrants do not succumb to what are described as the extreme ideas and philosophies of the latter. Such political management and shaping of religion rely heavily on various ‘voluntary’ initiatives and programmes for the purpose of constructing particular forms of moderate religion whose potential can then be harnessed to generate social capital and undermine the control of religion by militant extremism.

Relatively recently, sociology of religion has turned its attention, with considerable benefit to the subdiscipline, to new areas of research, to which an organic understanding of religion is best suited, such as the phenomenon of unchurched spirituality, and to the new religious vitality which is widespread and which would appear to owe much of its strength to both local and global trends, including economic migration and the revolution in communications evidenced in the explosion in the use of cyberspace, an innovation that has contributed as much as any other technological innovation to the democratization and the de-objectification of religious knowledge and its transmission.

Among research topics equally relevant and important to a sociology of religion for this generation, but which have on the whole been neglected, are those of religion and ecology, religion and science, and the subject of irreligion. The last mentioned if taken country by country may appear highly marginal, but when looked at globally is in fact a substantial topic. In the case of all of these, as well as others mentioned above, the use of a global perspective and framework of analysis will serve research best, although the social roots or causes will never be exclusively global.

Many of these issues are addressed with expertise in the Handbook. So here I will confine myself to a few observations on some of the questions raised for the sociology of religion by such developments as the rise of the new religious vitality evident in contemporary society, the new forms of religious pluralism and diversity, and the political management of religion, and will end this section of the Introduction with a brief definition of what is meant here by the concept of organic religion. I suggest that this concept be used to overcome some of the serious limitations of the institutionalized understanding of religion and in particular its tendency to create an impression of religion as fixed and static, doctrinally focused, and of processes such as syncretism as aberrations. I also suggest that taking a more organic view of religion has implications for methodology in the sociology of religion, necessitating, as I believe it does, a greater use of ethnography and qualitative methods generally.
The New Religious Vitality

A generation ago, mainstream sociology of religion concerned itself almost exclusively with Western society, leaving the rest of the world to anthropology, and within that framework with Christianity. The dominant paradigm of the sociology of religion was religion's loss of significance at the institutional level and at the level of consciousness. The discourse in broad terms centred on the historical and sociological processes of differentiation whereby religion, once the dominant and overarching societal institution, was decoupled from other spheres of public life. A collective amnesia regarding religious history, beliefs, and practices followed. Now would seem to be the moment to refocus and place the emphasis on religious vitality and processes of ‘re-coupling’, ‘de-differentiation’ and ‘de-secularization’.

This change in focus should not, however, mean an end to research and debate on such standard topics as secularization and sectarianism, for these have by no means been exhausted. As Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) shows, new dimensions of secularization remain to be explored, and we have hardly begun to understand sectarianism outside the Christian context. Studies of this kind of well-established topics will doubtless breathe new life into the debate on these and other standard questions, as a number of the contributions to this Handbook show, including those that discuss issues such as the relationships between religion and evolutionary biology, religion and cognitive science, religious diversity, religious pluralism, the orientation of religions toward the world with special reference to modernization and the environment, religion and culture, religion and delinquency, and irreligion, among others.

It is not the point, therefore, of this Introduction to suggest that the past of sociology of religion has no future and that it be abandoned in favour of a totally new agenda; nor does it seek to discourage the further study of the classical sociological literature on religion. The subdiscipline can only benefit from this being better known and more widely read.

While sociological interest in the issue of religious vitality began some time ago (see Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Martin 1990; Berger et al. 1999), it has increased markedly since 9/11, when religion in its extreme forms came to be seen as a major social problem and in its ‘moderate’ forms as particularly useful for generating social capital, promoting pro-social behaviour, and protecting the most materially and socially vulnerable against crime.

The renewed religious vitality that we are at present witnessing is a worldwide phenomenon, the reasons for which vary from place to place, as do the forms it takes. In
Western Europe it is sometimes misleadingly seen as resulting from the arrival of unprecedented numbers of believing and practising economic migrants from Asia, Africa, and parts of Eastern Europe such as Poland and Lithuania. It cannot, however, be attributed solely to these developments, any more than the growth and dynamism of new forms of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, the resurgence of Islam across the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia, and the rise in China, Japan, and elsewhere in Asia of countless New Religious Movements (NRMs), some of them with millions of followers (Clarke 2006), can be attributed solely and directly to the forces of modernization and Westernization. In every incidence of religious vitality, both local and global social, economic, religious, and political forces are at work. The migration westwards of Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists from the Middle East and Asia has undoubtedly contributed to the vitality of religion in Western Europe, and in some cases has acted as a catalyst in this regard, giving rise to a Christianity that is more self-aware and self-assertive. But it has also to be kept in mind that there has been much lapsing and/or backsliding among immigrants, including among Muslim youth, and this has had repercussions on daw‘a, or mission, and on the quality of education provided by the madrasahs (Muslim schools), which in many parts of the world have become stricter about such matters as the effective teaching of Islamic knowledge. Backsliding is usually attributed to Western influence, and it has become the first priority of large, well-organized Islamic missionary movements such as Tablighi Jama‘at to reconvert those who lapse.

The religious dynamism and vitality and the ever increasing interest in spirituality, wherever they are found, need to be observed from within an internal-external, or a local and a global, framework. The expansion of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America, as Martin (1990) points out, can be best understood if seen from this perspective. It makes little sense to attribute it to CIA sponsorship of North American evangelists whom it is paying to brainwash the peoples of Latin America by spreading pacific forms of pro-American propaganda. The popular association of Catholicism with many of the political and economic ills of the continent has been crucial to the success of Evangelicalism. Likewise in the Muslim world, the Ikhwan or Muslim Brothers movement founded in 1929 by Hassan al Banna (1906–48)—perhaps the most influential of all the Islamist movements of modern times—cannot be fully understood, as Gibb (1978) and Mitchell (1969) point out, if seen purely as a response to Western influence in the Muslim world. The Brotherhood was concerned as much as anything else with rescuing Islam from local forms of corruption. The renewed religious vitality, then, whether we are discussing two of its main centres, Latin America and the Muslim world, clearly has its origins in both local and global conditions.
At this juncture I would like to describe briefly what is meant here by religious vitality. I want to stress that it is not to be understood primarily in terms of numerical growth, but concerns rather the dynamism, or ‘force’, and the ‘scope’ of religion in the contemporary world.

**Religious Vitality Unpacked**

Although he saw them as related, as they clearly are, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1968:111–12) made a useful distinction between the ‘force’ and the (p. 5) ‘scope’ of religion. His idea of force was not unlike Durkheim's (1915: 209) and referred to the degree of determination with which believers hold and are held by their faith. By scope he meant the range of social contexts within which religious views are considered as being either more or less relevant. Both of these aspects of religion have become more pronounced in recent times—as, it is worth noting, political ideologies have come to differ more in form than in substance. It could be said that religions too, at the lay level and the level of practice, are becoming increasingly like each other, and hence the concern of official religion to define more clearly the boundaries.

The increases in force and scope of religious belief have aroused considerable concern among humanists and even among devout and practising politicians, some of them Muslim, others Christian, and others Hindu. Among the Christian politicians who have expressed concern in this regard is the former United States President Jimmy Carter, who is persuaded that religion is striving to acquire too great an influence over the public realm, to the disadvantage of both the public and the religious spheres. By contrast, some secularization theorists continue to be persuaded that religion's influence over the public sphere has decreased, is decreasing, and will continue to decrease, for they argue that an ever more diverse and pluralist world that increasingly relativizes religious truth claims makes it virtually impossible for religion to regain a firm hold over the public arena. The present growth in individual religiosity and spirituality, it is claimed, affords proof of this.

It might be argued that secularization theory, on account of its institutional focus and its static concept of the phenomenon, has lost sight of religion's organic qualities, its potential dynamism, its capacity to reinvent itself and to combine with many other forms of life while retaining its own distinctiveness and conserving its own identity. Perhaps it has also underestimated religion's intellectual role, considering it to have been replaced by scientific explanation. However, for so many in the West as elsewhere, religious explanations of such persistent and intractable problems as the problem of evil and suffering remain as attractive as other, secular kinds of explanation. Moreover, religion's capacity to engender hope that the world can be transformed through such messianic