

# Complex Religion: Toward a Better Understanding of the Ways in which Religion Intersects with Inequality

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## Abstract

Sociologists have long known that religion is deeply interconnected with race, class, and ethnicity in the United States. However, modern sociologists typically study religion as if it is independent from other social structures. Profound class differences remain between American religious groups. Jews, Mainline Protestants and new immigrant groups such as Hindus are at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. Conservative Protestants, both Black and White remain at the bottom. We therefore argue that religion is not independent of class and race and should almost always be examined in interaction with these and other social structures. We call this, theoretical approach “complex religion.”

Classical sociologists understood that religion was a key place where Americans sorted by class (Baltzell, 1964; Demerath, 1965; Herberg, 1955; Pope, 1948). Contemporary scholarship has continued to confirm that these differences remain, especially in relationship to the lower socioeconomic status of Conservative Protestants (Lehrer, 2004; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Wilde & Glassman, 2016).

Researchers have also widely acknowledged that race has been and remains an important dividing line within American religion, especially for Protestants (Edwards, Christerson, & Emerson, 2013). As Martin Luther King Jr. once commented, “at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning ... we stand in the most segregated hour of America” (King, 1968).<sup>1</sup>

Despite acknowledging that religion always has been and continues to be deeply intertwined with inequality in the United States, sociologists who

1. Although studies of multiracial congregations have increased, this is because these congregations are the exception to the rule of the general pattern of religious racial segregation (Edwards, 2008; Marti, 2009).

study religion generally study it as a factor that is assumed to be independent from other factors and one that has “congruence,” or that is never contradictory (Chaves, 2010). Because of the field’s reliance on survey data and regression techniques, researchers generally control on class and race if examining religion, or on religion if examining other aspects of social life. As a result, we have contradictory findings about the importance of religion relative to other structures. For instance, some researches find that factors such as education, political affiliation, and income are more influential than religion on political behaviors and beliefs, while others find that religion continues to exert an influence even after controlling for these factors (Wilde & Glassman, 2016).

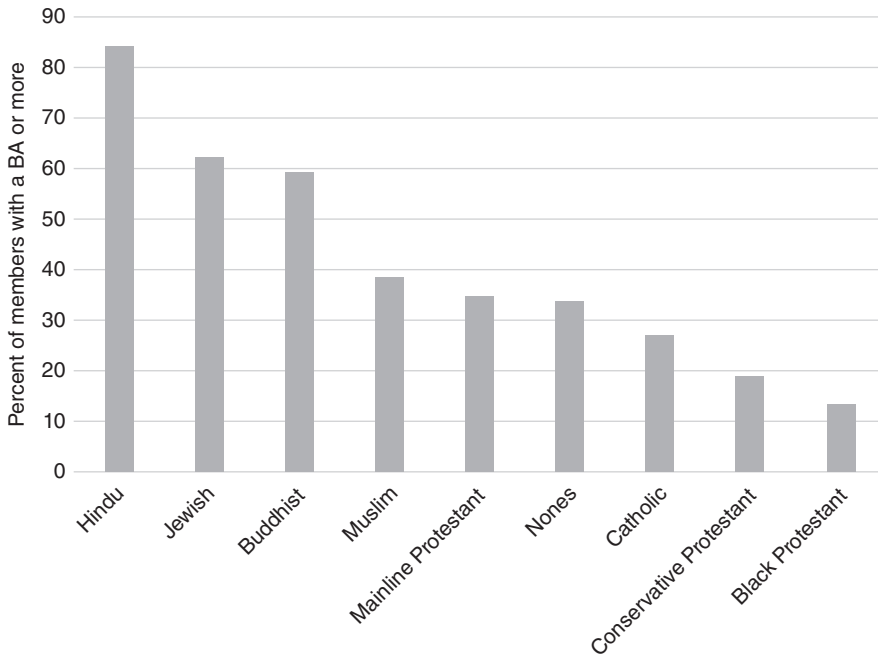
Searching for independent effects of religion does not allow for the very real and important ways that religion is intertwined with other social structures to be examined and considered causally. We argue that researchers should not just think about religion or about race or about class, but should think about the various combinations of these factors, how they differ in those combinations, and how those combinations matter. We call this theoretical argument and the methodological implications that derive from it “complex religion.”

The term *complex religion* builds on theories of complex inequality (Choo & Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2001). Researchers of complex inequality argue that social stratification is multidimensional. Different kinds of disadvantages lead to different outcomes and experiences. These researchers therefore urge others to examine how inequalities of gender, race, or class interact to create a unique impact on social experience. Complex religion extends these theories to include religious group membership among the social structures that matter for inequality.

Complex religion does not impose anything particularly new or counter-intuitive to what we already know about religion. A complex approach to religion simply means taking what researchers already take for granted and operationalizing it more precisely. In other words, most religion scholars would agree that the experiences and political outlooks of working class White and Black Protestant men would be different from one another—and also would be different from highly educated White Mainline Protestant women. The point of a complex religion approach is making sure that these realities are properly operationalized.

## THE CURRENT PICTURE

The first step in taking a complex approach to the study of religion simply requires acknowledging the extent of the class differences that exist among American religious groups and the ways in which they intersect with race



**Figure 1** Percent of bachelor's degrees by religious group in the United States<sup>2</sup> (age 25+). *Source:* GSS 1990–2016.

and ethnicity. Figure 1 provides a very simple but powerful illustration of these differences by presenting information on the percent of the members of each of the major religious groups in the United States that have at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>3</sup>

As Figure 1 indicates, today, White Conservative Protestants are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (Smith & Faris, 2005), with half of the proportion of bachelor's degrees as White Mainline Protestants or those of no religion.<sup>4</sup> Figure 1 also demonstrates that, among the upper classes, some of the most highly educated Americans are now of Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim faiths as a result of changes in immigration law since 1965 (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007).

2. The Conservative Protestant category includes 100 whites from the Black Protestant category.

3. While admittedly, this is only one possible measure of many that can be used to examine class differences, in other research we demonstrate that education is remarkably comparable to more complex measures that also incorporate occupation and income, and thus we rely on it here (Wilde, Tevington, & Shen, 2016a).

4. We employ the most widely used categorization scheme of religious traditions, called *RelTrad*, (Steensland *et al.*, 2000). However, we do not display the "Other Religion" category, as this is a "catch-all" category which includes a wide array of religious groups such as Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pagans, and so on. Instead, we break out some important individual religious groups, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims.

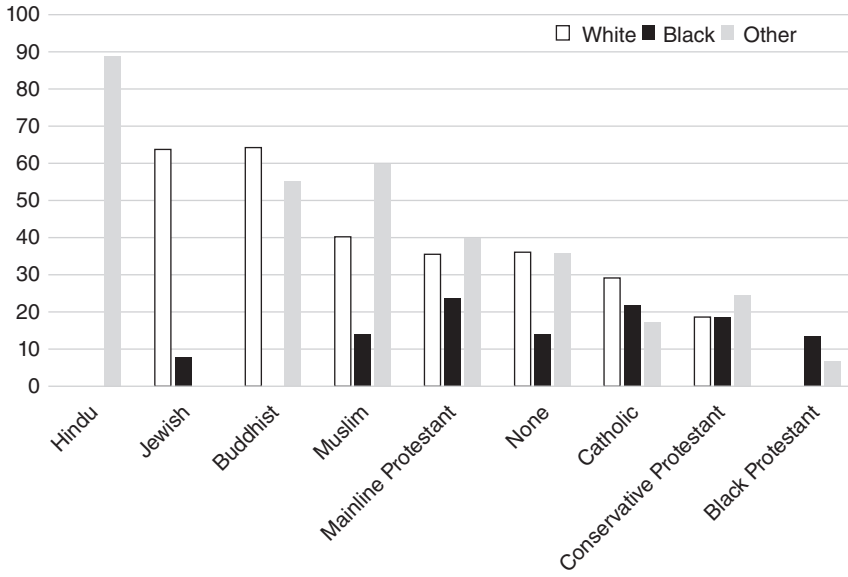
### How Did Things Get This Complex?

In employing the complex religion approach, we acknowledge many possible causes for the class differences that exist between American religious groups. While there is some, primarily older, evidence that some people may choose their religious affiliation because of their social class (Loveland, 2003; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995), we do not think that the vast majority of the differences explained below result from such religious switching. Similarly, although there is some limited evidence that some religious subcultures discourage class mobility (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997; Lehrer, 2004), we also do not argue that the differences illustrated above are primarily a result of religious groups encouraging or discouraging class mobility. While both these are possible mechanisms behind some of the differences between American religious groups, a theory of complex religion posits that the majority of these differences are a result of the processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984) set in place long ago by variations in immigration, settlement, and mobility patterns over the course of American history. Once established in the US, variation in access to opportunities, for example, access to educational benefits via the GI Bill (Wuthnow, 1988), have also had long-term effects.

Conditioned by immigration law and connected to processes of racialization (Wilde & Danielsen, 2014), the religion of immigrants was, and still is, often synonymous with their nation of origin (Herberg, 1955) and the push and pull factors behind various immigration patterns (Davidson & Pyle, 2011). Furthermore, different groups have come from different places with different religions over time, allowing some groups much more time for mobility and assimilation than others (Waters & Jiménez, 2005).

To put it in concrete terms, groups such as the Anglicans and Congregationalists, privileged since the founding of our country, made up the vast majority of the signers of Declaration of Independence (Davidson & Pyle, 2011). Today, they remain at the top of the socioeconomic ladder of the United States, as part of the group now commonly referred to as *Mainline Protestants*, (Figure 1), a term that originates from these groups' association with a series of elite suburbs in Philadelphia (Coffman, 2013).

In comparison to the advantages that still remain among the religious groups who descended from America's founding fathers, Black religious groups remain disadvantaged. Enslaved and oppressed since the founding of our country, Blacks, who largely converted to Protestantism during slavery but were excluded from participation in many White denominations (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1991), remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Figure 1 demonstrates that Black Protestants have the lowest educational attainment of all the religious groups in the United States.



**Figure 2** Percent of bachelor's degrees by religious group and race in the United States<sup>5</sup> (age 25+). *Source:* GSS 1990–2016.

These two examples above help to demonstrate how (and why) religion is so deeply intertwined with class and race in the United States. However, these two groups are but two of many possible examples of how class remains tied to religion within the American religious “marketplace” (Finke & Stark, 2005), far beyond those only at the highest and lowest rungs of the economic ladder.

Catholics are a prime example. At the turn of the twentieth century, American Catholics’ lower class status, questionable Whiteness, and high fertility was of deep concern to more elite Americans—driving their fears of “race suicide” (Wilde & Danielsen, 2014). Today, these descendants of mostly Irish and Italian immigrants have assimilated into the United States and many have largely achieved middle class White status (Greeley, 1978). This has made Catholics a very diverse group class-wise, especially given the more recent waves of Latino immigrants. The ways in which the class, ethnicity, and immigration cohort may vary among Catholics is roughly illustrated by Figure 2, which breaks all the religious groups in Figure 1 up by race and ethnicity. Latinos constitute the vast majority of those of “other” ethnicities in the Catholic category in Figure 2.<sup>6</sup>

5. This figure includes all religious and racial groups with more than 10 respondents from the pooled 1990–2016 General Social Survey, age 25 or above.

6. According to the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape survey, 87% of American Catholics in the “other” category are Latino (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Furthermore, as Figure 2 demonstrates, race and ethnicity remain deeply intertwined with religion in complex ways, with people of color generally, but not always, being disadvantaged relative to the White members of their religious groups.

Wuthnow (1988) argues that the American religious field began restructuring after World War II as educational differences grew within (instead of between) denominations. These differences created polarization within some denominations, with more educated liberals on one side and the less educated conservative members on the other. Thirty years later, as a result of various processes (including mergers and schisms at the denominational level and shopping and switching at the individual level), it is clear that the American religious field has restructured and that consequently, educational differences between religious groups are perhaps as big as they ever were, if not bigger. Because of this restructuring, researchers now almost always shift the unit of analysis to major religious *traditions* rather than denomination and almost universally separate Mainline versus Conservative Protestants—doing little with denominational affiliations such as Episcopalian or Methodist in most analyses, even if denominational affiliation remains an important part of some coding schemes (e.g., Steensland *et al.*, 2000).

Figure 1 also demonstrates that, just as historical immigration and settlement patterns are crucial to understanding religion's intersection with various structures of inequality, the contours of immigration today remain crucial. As we mentioned above, because of changes to immigration laws, recent immigrants from other areas of the world (and of mostly non-Christian faiths) are among the most educated of Americans today. For example, almost 85% of American Hindus have at least a bachelor's degree, more than double the percent of Mainline Protestants.

Finally, no discussion of complex religion would be adequate without mentioning the relatively recent growth of those with no religion, often referred to as *Nones* (Hout & Fischer, 2002), who are now 20% of the American population (Hout & Fischer, 2014). Theories of complex religion also help us to understand this group. There is evidence that those with no religion are more and more likely to be highly educated Americans who were raised religiously but now reject religion as a reaction to the growth of the Religious Right (Hout & Fischer, 2002, 2014; Margolis, 2016). Although not a focus of most research to date, understanding how and why education seems to push some young adults to rejecting religion altogether is squarely within the framework of complex religion, will be crucial to understanding the future of American politics, and is one of the most promising directions for future research.

In sum, religion is intricately interwoven in the fabric of American society. It is thus part and parcel of the other social structures that we know stratify it.

Properly operationalizing how and why those intersections matter is a crucial task for emerging research in the field. Some researchers have begun to tackle this immense task.

## PROMISING FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Religion and Race

As Emerson, Korver-Glenn, and Douds (2015) note, despite the fact that “American religious life is deeply stratified along racial lines” and although religion “holds incredible sway in reproducing the U.S. racial order,” the study of race and of religion are often segregated from one another. Other researchers agree and continue to emphasize that fixing this problem would allow us to understand many aspects of social life better.

For example, Barnes (2014) argues that researchers need to better understand the importance of the Black church in the Black community. Edgell (2017) argues that we need to examine why Black and White Conservative Protestants voted so differently in the most recent presidential election. In addition to these agenda items, other questions remain to be answered. For example, are Blacks who reject religion also more highly educated and liberal than their peers, as is the case with Whites? Are there implications for political views in relationship to variations in Blacks’ religiosity? What explains the overall lack of religious participation among Black men compared to women?

### Religion and Immigration and Ethnicity

Sociologists of religion have long argued that religion is important both as an avenue for assimilation and as a part of ethnic identity for American immigrants (Cadge & Ecklund, 2007). However, unfortunately, just as it is in relation to race, religion remains largely segregated from the study of immigration more generally. Thus, we have a few, at this point older, studies of Asian immigrant religion and we have much more research on Latino Protestants than we do on Latino Catholics (e.g., Bartkowski, Ramos-Wada, Ellison, & Acevedo, 2012; Ellison, Echevarría, & Smith, 2005; Kelly & Kelly, 2005; Kosmin & Keysar, 1995), although Protestants remain a relatively small proportion—approximately 20% (Pew Research Center, 2014)—of the Latino population in the United States.

As a result, interesting research questions remain to be explored in relation to religion, immigration, and ethnicity. For example, will these newest waves of immigrants hold onto their religion as Herberg (1955) predicted for previous waves of immigrants more than half a century ago? Will Latinos become White as previous waves of Catholic immigrants did and will that Whiteness hinge on class? Will the process be similar or different for immigrants of

non-Christian religions, particularly for Muslims given the current political climate?

*Religion and Gender* Although we have not mentioned it much in this essay, gender is also obviously a key social structure that intersects in complex ways with religion. Unfortunately, despite theoretical advances like “doing religion” that argue that one cannot “do religion” (Avishai, 2008) without “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987), gender and religion also tend to remain distinct research areas from one another. Thus, those interested in gender and religion bemoan “... [the] marginalized status of gender within the subfield of sociology of religion and the lackluster interest in religion among sociologists of gender.” (Avishai, Jafar, & Rinaldo, 2015a)

Recently, however, there has been some work in this area. These include an entire special issue of *Gender and Society* on gender and religion (Avishai, Jafar, & Rinaldo, 2015b), as well as recent work on Muslim converts’ experiences with polygamy by gender (Rao, 2015), the differences in religiosity among high-income and low-income men and women (Schnabel, 2016), how Conservative Protestant young men understand and practice masculinity both before and after marriage (Diefendorf, 2015), and how unmarried heterosexuals and gay and lesbian members of conservative religions “do religion” (Irby, 2014).

Despite these exciting trends, many questions remain to be answered. For example, although many have noticed and some have attempted to explain them, questions remain about the significant gender differences in participation for most religious groups in the United States. In addition to questions about participation, the ways that gender intersects with religion are surely relevant to all of the other intersections discussed here. Some questions that touch on these issues might be: How will the assimilation of new immigrants be affected by the sometimes more traditional gender norms of their religions? How will members of these religious groups come to view reproductive rights and gender equality more generally?

## Religion and Class

Recent research demonstrates that religion intersects with class differently on attitudes towards abortion, homosexuality, economic redistribution, and political party identification (Wilde, Tevington, & Shen, 2016b). Whereas education liberalizes most Americans’ views especially on abortion and homosexuality, this is not true for Conservative Protestants. This finding may be due to the fact that many Conservative Protestants opt out of mainstream educational institutions, choosing homeschooling (Stevens, 2003),



private Conservative Protestant high schools (Guhin, 2014), or colleges affiliated with parachurch organizations (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2017). Much research needs to be done on the potential effects of separate educational institutions for Conservative Protestants and other groups—both in terms of survey data and ethnographic studies of the nature and messages of these institutions.

That said, while qualitative studies of Conservative Protestants colleges are lacking, there has been a relative boom of recent qualitative studies that examine other combinations of religious and class differences. Tevington (2017) is studying the varied reactions to early marriage among Conservative Protestants of different social classes, and finds that middle class Conservative Protestants face sanctioning when they do not secure educational and occupational footholds prior to starting their families. Glassman (2016) shows that members of religious groups who reject all forms of modern medicine are overwhelmingly working class, while those who use “holistic and alternative medicine” are the highly educated of many faith backgrounds. Ellis (2016) demonstrates that the status hierarchy among American religious groups can reverse in prison, with the greater resources allocated to Conservative Protestants giving them more social and material advantages vis-à-vis other religious groups and especially compared to inmates who are not active in any religious group.

Although we have already mentioned that how and why education seems to push some young adults to reject religion seems like a fruitful area for future research, many other questions about how class and religion intersect remain. For example, given the overwhelming correlation of class and religion for many religious groups, is it possible to separate out the effects of class and religion on important social issues and political beliefs?

## CONCLUSION

In sum, while there is a substantial amount of research that looks at various aspects of religion’s intersection with other social structures (and particularly those that are relevant to inequality), such work is generally the exception to the rule in a field where researchers are trained to look for independent effects of religion. We hope that this essay will encourage more researchers to think about the intersections so that we can better understand religion in all its complexity.

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