

“Hidden in Plain Sight”: The Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Secular Organizations

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Through examples from our own research and that of others, we argue that there is much to learn about religion through the study of its presence in secular organizations where it is “hidden in plain sight.” Making “invisible religion” visible furthers arguments about why sociologists should care about religion and shows how religion can be conceptualized to help us understand religious history, social change, and social processes. Additionally, we show that better understanding how individuals piece together a bricolage of meanings, including those forged from religious beliefs and practices, will come only from also paying attention to the social contexts—many of them secular—that contribute to shaping individual lives. We conclude by suggesting that sociologists of religion model how sociologists of gender and race have conceived of gender and race at individual and structural levels in ways that integrate their concerns more thoroughly with the discipline of sociology.

Key words: organizations; healthcare; chaplains.

At the 2013 American Sociological Association Annual meeting, the two of us met to have a discussion beginning with the question: how do sociologists approach and conceive of religion outside of what are usually thought of as its most common locations, such as in congregations, other religious organizations, and social movements? We immediately thought of recent groundbreaking research that focuses on examining individuals’ religious and/or spiritually oriented practices and narratives in various facets of everyday life (Ammerman 2014; Bender 2010; McGuire 2008). But the case studies and developing questions central to

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¹This article represents an equal collaboration between us. Our names are listed alphabetically.

our own recent research projects suggested a different path. Wendy Cadge had just finished a study of religion and spirituality in large academic medical centers, and has recently begun studies of chaplaincy in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, seaports, and airports (Cadge 2012). Mary Ellen Konieczny is currently engaged in a historically based study of contemporary issues surrounding religion in the U.S. military, with the U.S. Air Force Academy constituting its central case (Konieczny and Rogers 2013). Moreover, maybe because we are both married to individuals trained in architecture, our mutual interests include the physical and material evidence of religion and spirituality in organizations (e.g., buildings and artifacts) as well as the cultural and the symbolic, data which relatively few others in sociology seem to have analyzed (Cadge et al. 2012).

Our research sites led us each separately, and then together, to ask particular questions about where and how religion is present in secular organizational settings generally—that is, those organizations without a mission or values statement that explicitly identifies them as religious, or formally affiliates them with a religious organization (Bender et al. 2013). Previous research concerning the relationship between religion and organizations has focused most explicitly on *religious* organizations, rather than on religion *in* nonreligious organizations, leaving the latter under-theorized (Demerath et al. 1998; Hall 1997). We wondered about how studying such settings could contribute to a fuller empirical description and theoretical account of how religion matters sociologically in a secular, or postsecular, age (Taylor 2007; Warner et al. 2010).

As we began to brainstorm some of the secular organizational contexts in which religion is present institutionally in the built environment or in the presence of chaplains or other religious actors, we added prisons, colleges and universities, some sports settings, fire and police departments, the Red Cross, and some businesses to our list of healthcare institutions, airports, seaports, some governmental bodies, and the military. Some of these are obvious secular locations where, using Martin Riesebrodt's definition, the raw materials of religion—in crises surrounding the body, nature, and social life—are to be found (Riesebrodt 2010). In some of these sites, religion is publicly evident, though often overlooked, in physical spaces or in the formal role of the chaplain. In others, religion is present more quietly in the lives and work of individuals but not in a physical space or specific role.

Thus, we ask: How is religion and spirituality manifested and lived out daily in secular settings, at both individual and organizational levels? What can these sites tell us about the past and present trajectory of American religion, how people practice religion and spirituality today, and the shape of contemporary American religion more generally? What factors explain variations in how religion and spirituality have been present in different kinds of secular organizations and among religious people within them?

In this article, we begin to address these questions by making two central arguments and suggesting a conceptual way forward. First, we demonstrate that there is much to learn about religion through the study of its presence in secular

organizations, precisely because it is “hidden in plain sight.” Making “invisible religion” visible not only furthers arguments about why sociologists should care about religion but also shows how religion can be operationalized conceptually to help us understand not only religious history, but social change and social processes more broadly. Second, better understanding how individuals piece together a *bricolage* of meanings, including those forged from religious beliefs and practices, will come only from *also* paying attention to the social contexts—many of them secular organizations—that contribute to shaping individual lives. As a way forward, we recommend that sociologists of religion conceive of religion at the individual and structural levels in organizations and engage with a broader group of scholars. We look to the ways sociologists of gender and race have conceived of gender and race as fundamental aspects of both identity and social structure that are frequently contested in organizations and beyond, for models of how sociologists of religion might proceed. Such approaches have the potential to draw the attention of our peers throughout the discipline to facets of religion in secular organizations including workplaces, schools, governments, and other spheres in ways generative for future more integrative research.

FINDING “INVISIBLE RELIGION” IN SECULAR ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

When asked why sociologists should care about the study of religion, those of us who study religion frequently refer to statistics demonstrating high levels of religious belief, practice, and membership in the United States and/or national and world events that demonstrate either religious resurgence or the continued significance of religion around the globe (see Casanova 1994; Linden 2009). Both of these responses motivate the study of religion empirically. However, neither response directly motivates a situated, contextual approach to understanding religious practice on the ground and in the lives of individuals and intermediate groups *outside* of religious congregations and movements. This is an important gap in our knowledge, since much of contemporary everyday life is lived in precisely such settings.

A portion of this gap in the literature stems from secularization theories, which posit both that religion declines in importance and is differentiated from other aspects of social life historically in the modern West (e.g., Berger 1967; Chaves 1994; Warner 1993). While relatively few of us who study religion have been fully convinced by the argument about decline—preferring instead to think about change—many, perhaps the majority, of social scientists in fact *assume* the empirical reality of secularization and conclude it is insignificant for social life, despite the fact that the empirical interplay of religious vitality and secularization do not indicate the insignificance of religion. Many sociologists of religion agree, rightly, that differentiation and/or privatization of religion has taken place in some social arenas, while also demonstrating religion’s vitality, effects, and resurgence

both in public arenas and in the routines of everyday life (e.g., Casanova 1994; Davidman 1991; Wood 2002). As the United States becomes more plural generally and the old Protestant establishment is further “distestablished,” religion flourishes along with religious difference (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Warner 1993; Warner and Wittner 1998).

A similar admixture of secularization and religious vitality appears in organizational contexts, including religious ones (Chaves 2004). In the secular world, we see this mixing of vitality and secularization in universities and healthcare organizations founded by religious organizations, where arguably, religion has become less of a public marker of institutional identity and religious practice has become increasingly privatized. The American Protestant Hospital Association, for example, declined and then ceased to exist in the last century as Protestant hospitals closed or merged with secular ones; by then, chaplaincy departments had become the primary holders of Protestant (and diverse other) religious identities (Cadge 2012). In other organizational contexts, we have seen evidence of increasing religious activity. For example, both military ceremonies and prison chaplaincies reflect religious vitality and pluralism as they have been required to make room for non-Christian religions (Dubler 2013).

Such changes are further evident in the development and use of chapel spaces in a range of secular settings. In universities and colleges, for example, John Schmalzbauer (forthcoming) and others show how religious life remains strong and diverse on university campuses and how physical space and staff have changed to accommodate it (Grubiak 2012; Jacobsen and Jacobsen 2012). In healthcare, chapel spaces have shifted more from those designed within particular religious traditions to those which aim to serve all, often through the use of fountains and modern art rather than religious or spiritual symbols as their orienting images (Cadge 2013).

In these and other secular contexts, the sociological analysis of the trajectory of religion in historical events must play a central role. Consider the example of the U.S. Senate, which has had a tradition of legislative prayer since 1774, when Jacob Duché, rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, was recruited to offer prayers before the First Continental Congress. Since then, formal prayers have continued to be offered before the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives as well as in many state legislatures (Brudnick 2011; Byrd 1982; Gunn 2010). Initial analyses of prayers offered in the U.S. Senate between 1990 and 2010 show significant changes in 20 years: more recent Senate chaplains are less likely to quote the Bible explicitly or mention the name of Jesus though they continue to rely on underlying Christian imagery. Importantly, such changes do not necessarily provide evidence of religious decline, but in fact are an implicit recognition of growing religious pluralism. They demonstrate a shift in underlying assumptions about what is and is not appropriate for chaplains to say in prayer and changing ideas of the centrality of the Bible in American civil religion and public life (Cadge et al. 2014).

Related findings about the declining appropriateness of explicit Christian talk and symbols in public life is further evident in Winifred Sullivan’s forthcoming

book *A Ministry of Presence* and Kim Hansen's study of how U.S. military chaplains respond on the ground to religious diversity (Hansen 2012; Sullivan forthcoming). In government settings and those related to governmental administration, such as the military, we see empirically a broadening awareness of religious practice in all its growing diversity, one that is both allowed to flourish and at the same time monitored so that religious disestablishment and its free exercise, enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, are maintained. Therefore, studying religion in secular organizations allows us to examine closely how the tension between the disestablishment of religion and its free exercise affects social life not only at the level of public institutions but also in the everyday lives of people who practice religion, as well as those whose identities include a negative stance toward religion.

Thus, while many religious organizations display some evidence of secularization, especially as differentiation (Chaves 1994), many secular organizations, especially those engaged in public speech in civil society, show a renewed or active insertion of religion into the public life of institutions and shifted public/private boundaries around aspects of religious life (Casanova 1994). And yet, beyond a few studies, we know little about where religion has been revitalized in secular organizations, nor how public and private aspects of religious practices are negotiated, have changed over time, and why. While the presence of religious professionals in setting such as hospitals and universities are public, not private as it is in Thomas Luckmann's sense of invisible religion, religion in these settings is today seldom studied sociologically, rendering it invisible to scholars (Luckmann 1967).

In addition, considering religion in secular organizations is an opportune site for study in light of contemporary patterns of religious change that involve confidence in institutions and the interplay of religion and secularity more generally. Significantly, atheists and secular humanists have recently developed organized social movements that are challenging religion, often by presenting meaning systems that explore questions traditionally answered by religions (Pasquale 2010; Smith 2011). Such empirical realities underscore the importance of examining, not only the interface between religion and secularity in secular organizations, but also, how religion and spirituality are experienced and practiced outside of congregations. Such a research agenda has high potential to increase our knowledge about the causes and consequences of religious change generally.

HOW SECULAR ORGANIZATIONS SHAPE RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND PRACTICE (AND VICE VERSA)

In addition to revealing hidden aspects of American religious history and practice organizationally, the ways religion and spirituality are present in secular settings may also influence the beliefs and practices of individuals in those settings. As sociologists of religion increasingly point to the multiplicity of forms

that individual religious and spiritual experiences take, better understanding the factors that shape these experiences must include attention to how they are facilitated or inhibited in specific secular contexts (Bender 2010).

Workplaces are one important setting—one, in fact, where the relation between religion and work has been investigated sociologically in some classic traditions of research as a part of a larger agenda. Consider, for example, E. P. Thompson's landmark study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, or even earlier studies in the American community studies tradition, such as Liston Pope's work, *Millhands and Preachers* (Pope 1942; Thompson 1966). Both studies draw attention to and analyze the significant relationships between work, social class, and religion in contexts where the mill or the factory is a central determinant in people's lives as a whole. Such studies demonstrate how historically, paternalistic businesses supported and/or provided religious goods, including churches and ministers, for workers. Both studies show how religion was used as a strategy of control exercised by owners over workers, especially in how Methodism and other Protestant religious traditions were used to counsel compliance with company policies that were against workers' interests. They also show the profound power of ownership's control, for example, in cases where ministers who espoused religious teachings supporting movements for unionization were ultimately unsuccessful. Revisiting these studies and considering how this tradition of scholarship might be reinvigorated may be of particular relevance today considering recent corporate activities suppressing worker union organizing.

In addition, workplace chaplaincy itself has an uneven and little known history (Miller 2007; Seales 2012), as do more hidden instances of religious practice in work settings. We know little about such practices, though Nancy Ammerman in her recent study of spiritual narratives describes many people who related that aspects of their work were deeply meaningful and included a spiritual dimension. Ammerman argues that this spiritual sensibility resides not in the job but in the mind of the person doing it. But she leaves unanswered questions about the ways or extent to which the organizations for which people worked facilitated or inhibited such understandings (Ammerman 2014).

Separate from personal experiences, religious networks in workplaces also have and continue to shape some people's professional networks and daily experiences. A small group of physicians, for example, gathers weekly to study scripture and related topics in an academic hospital in the northeast (Messikomer and De Craemer 2002). Case studies of organizations like hospitals show nurses privately praying and people with shared religious backgrounds gathering for moments of mutual support (Bender and Smith 2004; Cadge 2012; Konieczny and Rogers 2013; Messikomer and De Craemer 2002). Michael Lindsay's book about elite Christian evangelicals shows how their beliefs and networks affect their experiences (and what they are able to accomplish) in the halls of business, government, and other seats of power (Lindsay 2008). In these and other studies, the extent to which religion facilitates workplace connections versus the workplace facilitating religious connections is rarely analytically distinguished.

Significantly, a recent national study conducted by the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding suggests that, at least nationally, there are significant barriers to religious practice and dialogue in many workplaces. More than one-third of all respondents and close to one-half of non-Christians surveyed said they experienced or witnessed religious nonaccommodation by their employers such as being asked to work on religious holidays or Sabbath observances or attending company-sponsored events without religiously appropriate food options for all present. Many respondents also reported being uncomfortable when religious issues were raised by co-workers and cited concerns about discrimination based on religion (Understanding 2013). Some smaller qualitative studies paint a different picture. For example, some taxi drivers in New York City find ways to pray in the midst of their daily routines, and some Catholic lawyers in Chicago have the opportunity to meet with a priest in their offices on company time (Bender and Smith 2004; Konieczny 2013).

Further evidence of how secular contexts shape and are shaped by the religious experiences of people in them is presented in a range of other studies. Mary Ellen Konieczny finds that religion shapes, and is shaped by, military contexts both materially and organizationally (Konieczny 2012; Konieczny and Rogers 2013). The historically significant Cadet Chapel at the U.S. Air Force Academy is an architectural structure that, in both its symbolism and its material form, shapes perceptions of religion as well as religious activities on base. The 3-in-1 chapel that was originally created to accommodate the “Protestant–Catholic–Jewish” (Herberg 1955) religious practice of the post-World War II United States both constrains the ways in which religion is present on base, and provides a model for how religious pluralism is recognized. In fact, the production of new worship spaces, such as the Buddhist Chapel and the Earth Centered worship space, demonstrates the relationship between the recognition of religious pluralism and its material embodiment (Konieczny 2012).

The Cadet Chapel is also symbolically significant at USAFA more generally. Speaking in the wake of the 2004 religious proselytism controversy, staff and faculty commented upon how the Cadet Chapel, built in the late 1950s to be the “Centerpiece of the Academy” symbolically represents and helps to constitute the constant influence and centrality of religion at USAFA, even though it is a secular military institution. Although many factors, e.g., its location in Colorado Springs and the high percentage religiously observant servicemen and women, in part shape religion’s significance at USAFA, the military as a governmental institution dedicated to preserving the Constitution, including religious disestablishment and free exercise, clearly shapes the role of religion in USAFA’s culture (Konieczny and Rogers 2013; Konieczny and Whitnah 2013).

Finally, looking at how religion influences people’s experiences in secular settings opens broader vistas of inquiry often overlooked by sociologists more generally. Walking through Logan airport in Boston, visitors are often surprised to discover a large chapel that looks much, on the inside, like a Catholic church. Tended to by an airport chaplain, who was also one of the first people notified

when the airlines discovered that a Boston departed flight was being hijacked on 9/11, this was the first airport chapel in the United States opened in 1951. Interestingly, it was one of several workmen's chapels built by the Boston archdiocese at the time—others were built in the port of Boston and the train station—to bring priests, sacraments, and religious services to the workers (*Boston Globe* articles, [August 12, 1966](#), [November 17, 1952](#), [Russo October 12, 1952](#)). Today, the chapels in the airport and port remain, visited by a trickle to steady stream of visitors, depending on the day, seeking something religious or spiritual in an otherwise secular setting. Study of these chapels points to the orientation of the Catholic leadership in Boston in the 1950s (and its changes to the present) as well to people continuing today to seek and do things religious in otherwise secular contexts.

The chapel and chaplain at Logan—and interviews with airport chaplains across the country—point to quieter aspects of workplace life in airports often overlooked by scholars, evident in Cadge's work in progress on the topic. They reveal stories about the bodies of soldiers being returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, of people traveling to care for ill loved ones, and of the daily stress of working as a ticket or gate agent particularly during snow and thunderstorms. Similarly, the chapel in the port of Boston is today rarely visited by a seafarer telling the beginning of a story about the decline of the American merchant marines and subsequent economic and social changes ([George 2013](#)). While this can be told as a story about the changing place of religion in the lives of seafarers, it is also a story about the changing nature of who seafarers are, the work they do and the risks they take—a story largely invisible to sociologists and the broader American public.

CONCLUSION

Identifying and theorizing about aspects of religion “hidden in plain sight” expands how we think about religion conceptually as well as how we understand its presence in secular organizations and American public life more generally. Older theoretical blinders related to theories of secularization and differentiation have prevented many sociologists of religion from seeing these aspects of religion and are barriers to more fully integrating these cases into central ways of thinking about religion in American life. The Protestant history of the United States—and its influence upon the sociology of religion—also plays a role as religious assumptions were built in to early conceptual categories and what was seen as religious in public life ([Bender et al. 2013](#)).

Seeing how religion is present in these ways has the potential to help sociologists of religion connect theoretically with broader scholarly conversations, in ways similar to how scholars of gender and race have connected with the sociology of organizations. While sociologists of religion have frequently relied on insights from the study of organizations to inform their own studies, few have successfully engaged in a true dialogue with scholars in other subdisciplines, in which insights from the study of organizations inform studies of religion and vice

versa. When they have—such as in the work of Nancy Ammerman, Penny Edgell Becker, and Mark Chaves—this engagement has focused almost entirely on explicitly religious organizations, primarily congregations (Ammerman 2005; Becker 1999; Chaves 1997).

This engagement is fundamentally different from how scholars of gender and race have conceived of the gendered and/or racialized dimensions of organizations—an ongoing set of questions concerned with these factors at all levels of organizations' operations. Joan Acker in the early 1990s, for example, argued that organizations are gendered and that gender is enacted in particular organizations through underlying structures of organizations (and their contexts) and the ways that responsibilities, symbols, identities, and other social processes occur within the organization (Acker, 1990, 1992). Dana Britton and colleagues furthered these arguments in the 2000s with attention to the multiple levels along which organizations are gendered and specific case studies that examined the causes and consequences of these gendered patterns (Britton 2000).

More recently, sociologists of religion and gender are working to further their intellectual linkages and shared orientations through collaborative efforts such as joint sessions between the Gender Section and Religion Section of ASA, and the forthcoming special issue of *Gender & Society* which includes attention to how organizational cultures shape and are shaped by religion and gender in interaction at individual and structural levels. In addition to these broad approaches to organizations, scholars of gender and race have simultaneously influenced scholars of organizations to attend to the principles and concerns of their subdisciplines and also by considering specific issues including tokenism, wage gaps and advancement, professional relationships (Ely 1994; Martin et al. 1998), and negotiating and work styles (Ely and Thomas 2001).

Modeling the approaches of scholars of race and gender, we encourage sociologists of religion moving forward to think analytically about not just the organizational aspects of religious organizations but also about the religious aspects of secular organizations. We know that religious people often use religion to construct coherent identities that reach into secular public arenas. As scholars of gender and race have done, we should draw the attention of our peers throughout the discipline of sociology to facets of secular organizations where religion is present, allowing us to show where and how religion is a constitutive aspect of identity that is fundamental to social identity and behavior.

As a guide to hypothesizing the secular organizational settings in which we might be most likely to find religion “hiding in plain sight,” we propose Martin Riesebrodt's (2010) emphasis on the relation of religious practice to crises surrounding the body, the natural world, and social relationships. As we have shown in this brief review of our own research and that of others, some of these areas speak directly to sociologists of organizations, work, and the family. This might also include studies of when and how organizational leaderships must make decisions about religion in the workplace as well as, at times, how leaders' religious involvements may affect organizational leadership; how policies and employment

practices affect “everyday religion” as practiced in workplaces; and when and how workers use religious worldviews and *ethoi* to interpret their work tasks and interactions with others.

This would be an important point of connection, not only with scholars who study work and occupations, but perhaps especially those who work at the intersection of work and family on topics such as work–family balance. Religion and family are historically interconnected, and while both are thought of as “private” dimensions of life in the late modern West, both appear to be increasingly entering into the “public” world of work. People are not only bringing religious and familial practices to workplaces to the extent they are allowed; they are also asking for, and at times demanding, workplace accommodations for both religion and family, complicating the public–private distinction. Examining how religion and family may be intertwined in workplace behavior benefits the agenda of family scholars as well as those who study religion.

Moreover, given the charge that governmental bodies must fulfill in protecting constitutional freedoms, government-related organizations—of interest perhaps especially to political sociology and urban sociology—may be particularly fertile sites for better viewing the role religion plays in secular contexts in contemporary American life. Such a frame will necessarily lead to broader empirical studies about the shapes religion takes in secular settings which, inevitably, raise key conceptual questions about what counts as religion in contemporary American culture and who is doing the counting that are essential moving forward. We are reminded, in this spirit, of an ordained minister certified as a crisis chaplain who was called to serve following a natural disaster in the States a few years ago. As bodies of the dead were, literally, brought in to his area of service every evening in refrigerated trucks, he was instructed to pray over them—not by opening the doors of the vehicle (the smell would be too much) or by summoning the name of his or other gods. Rather, he simply lifted his hands, gave thanks in as neutral a way as he could muster for their lives, and asked that their loved ones be cared for through this difficult time. He understood these directions to come from the top levels of the federal government and he performed this ritual alone, without congregational or community support. What this practices tells us about how we in the United States care for our dead, what role the government and religion play in it amidst natural disasters, and how we make sense of this as sociologists of religion, is really only beginning.

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