

# What is Sociology that Religionists should be Mindful of? The Relevance of the Sociology of Religion for Studying Change in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Dawid Venter  
University of Missouri-St Louis

I gauge how relevant sociology of religion is to sociologists who study change in South Africa by providing empirical evidence that South African sociologists have increasingly neglected religion. Yet sociology of religion *should* be relevant. I demonstrate why, using examples from my own limited work on the interaction between global norms and language practice in local multiracial congregations, and between the integration of the world-economy and the emergence of certain African Indigenous Churches. I conclude that analyses of local religious phenomena from a world system perspective can provide a clearer understanding of the systemic dialectic between local *and* global change.

## Introduction

My topic requires me to define sociology of religion, which I distinguish from religious sociology on the one hand, and from the sociological study of religion on the other. *Sociology of religion* refers in a strict sense to the study of religion from within a subdiscipline of sociology. This in turn implies the use of certain perspectives, theories and concepts that are peculiar to that discipline, in addition to a preference for empirical methods. The implicit goal of research here is to add to the body of theoretical or empirical knowledge that demarcates the subdiscipline itself, or sociology as a whole. A related term is *religious sociology*, a term used to signal an ontological – rather than a methodological or a theoretical – distinction. Religious sociology aims to promote the objectives of a particular religious grouping. The study of congregations in order to improve their functioning or delivery of programmes within a particular neighbourhood is an example of religious sociology. Both sociology of religion and religious sociol-

ogy are practised within the boundaries of sociology. The same sociologist can engage in religious sociology and in sociology of religion – they are not mutually exclusive.

A third possibility is to speak of the *sociological* study of religion, in which sociological theories and empirical methods are applied by religionists or religious practitioners who owe no allegiance to sociology and who are theoretically oriented towards other disciplinary frameworks. For example, practical theologians may employ empirical methods, and New Testament scholars may apply sociological theories to reconstruct the social context of Pauline Christianity (e.g. Holmberg 1990, Osiek 1992).

The discussion raises the question as to what qualifies as “sociological”, with reference to theories and analyses. One could define *sociological* in a circular fashion as indicating theories constructed by practitioners within the boundaries of the discipline of sociology. *Sociology*, in turn, can be understood as concerned with the investigation of social structure, the collective construction of meaning, and social action (compare Marshall 1994: 502). As the methods used by sociologists now tend to be shared with anthropology and a number of other academic disciplines, there is no particular method that could by itself qualify as ‘sociological’. There is of course a sociological approach or ‘imagination’, an attempt to analytically link micro-practices to macro-trends. In short, sociology of religion requires, minimally, the use of sociological theories to examine religious phenomena within a particular disciplinary framework.

While the notion of religion seems unproblematic, this is of course notoriously not the case. There are at least three problems involved in defining religion. The first problem is that scholars who coin definitions often have a *hidden agenda*, as they want to include or exclude particular groups. David Chidester has pointed out that definitions of who did and did not have religion was part of the political struggle to control and delegitimize indigenous peoples. A second problem is that a definition of religion has to explain what religion is (its nature), as well as what it is that people devote themselves to. This presents an impossible task: the definition has to be general enough to include aspects common to *all* religions, yet at the same time be specific enough to apply to *any* particular religion. A third problem is that definitions can be *ethnocentric*, for instance, the meanings attached to “sacred”, which from group to group may refer to particular objects, places, plants, animals, or beings.

Sociologist Malcolm Hamilton (1995: 20) suggests that “religion” is a collective name for a range of “many different things – philosophical systems, cosmologies, systems of morality ...”. He pictures religion as three overlapping circles, like a Venn diagram. One circle includes *religion* as “action directed towards objects which are believed to respond in terms of certain categories – in our own culture those of purpose, intelligence and emotion – which are also the distinctive categories for the description of human action” (Hamilton 1995: 26,

quoting anthropologist Robin Horton 1960: 211). Another circle comprises *morality*; "principles and ideals of behaviour". A third circle refers to *faith* – "systems of belief and associate practices which do not involve interaction on the human pattern with the non-human" (Hamilton 1995: 20). In order to describe a religion, we place it in one or more of the circles of the diagram. Hamilton thinks that Christianity and Islam can be placed in all three or at the centre of the diagram: they are moral systems, religions, and faiths at the same time. He fits traditional religions, like African Traditional Religion, into the first circle, suggesting that morality or faith does not play as large a role in these as in other religions.

Hamilton's proposal deals with the usual criticisms of "religion" by allowing us to attach both narrower and broader meanings to the term. The broader concept permits us to include a number of moral systems, religions, and faiths which would typically not have qualified as "religion", a result that would have rendered the definition useless. The narrower sense authorises us to utilise a classic definition of religion that otherwise would have been excluded if the term had been discarded. In the latter sense religion refers to "a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is sacred and, usually, supernatural" (Hamilton 1995: 13). Emile Durkheim suggested a similar definition in 1915, when he said that religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things ... set apart and forbidden .... which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them" (quoted in Hamilton 1995: 12).

In this presentation I will limit myself to discussing the study of religion by sociologists, thus excluding the study of religion by use of sociological theories. While I refer in the first section to religion in general, I will confine myself in the second section to Christianity, broadly defined, as the religion that I have studied most, with particular attention to both multiracial congregations and to African Indigenous Churches.

In the first section of this article I address the issue of relevance by asking how relevant sociology of religion is to the study of change in South Africa, and, second, how relevant sociology of religion *should be* in this regard. In essence this leads me to consider how relevant religion is to sociology, and how relevant sociology is to religion. The relevance of religion to sociology is pertinent in a discussion of change, as sociology is meant to be a study of society. I will provide evidence that shows how religion has increasingly been neglected by South African sociologists. My data is drawn from an overview of the state of sociology of religion within sociology departments at South African universities.

In the second section I approach the question of relevance by considering a selection of recent investigations in South Africa within the sociology of religion.

## The Relevance of Sociology of Religion for Sociology in South Africa<sup>2</sup>

The relevance of sociology for the study of change is based on an impeccable pedigree. The more recent roots of the discipline are found in attempts by European scholars to explain the radical transformations that their societies were undergoing. In particular, the European proto-sociologists suggested that social change took the form of a new order, modernity, which radically altered the older social orders. For instance, small-scale communities based on face-to-face relationships were regarded as generally having dissolved into large-scale societies based on associations (Lechner 1989: 11-12).

The link between sociology and religion existed in South Africa prior to the formal establishment of sociology as a discipline in the 1930s. Sociology was included in religious education as "social economics", a compulsory part of the Bachelor of Divinity degree at the University of South Africa (Unisa) from 1918 onwards. This proto-sociology was renamed sociology in 1923 (Groenewald 1984: 279-80). As sociology gradually shed its guise as an aid to other disciplines, the situation was reversed, and religion was taken up in sociology curricula. In 1937 sociology of religion was an option in the fifth question of the first structured MA in sociology (Groenewald 1984: 273).

In the next subsection I suggest that this relationship has changed drastically over the last two decades, and examine the reasons why this is the case.

### ***How relevant is religion to sociology?***

The question whether South African sociology has recognised the relevance of the investigation of religion for the study of our society must receive a negative answer. My conclusion is based on data that I collected in a recent survey of 21 sociology departments through 25 semi-structured interviews and scrutiny of curricula in yearbooks (Venter 1998, 1996). In addition, I scrutinised all Masters' theses and Doctorate dissertations between 1969 and 1995.<sup>3</sup>

Sociology of religion was not always in dire straits. For about ten years, from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s, a sociology of religion course formed part of the undergraduate curriculum at the Universities of Cape Town, South Africa (1970-80), the Western Cape (1972-80), Pretoria (1970-1980), and the Witwatersrand (1976-80, 1983-1996), while at Huguenot College sociology of religion has been taught since 1951. Although not always called "sociology of religion", a freestanding undergraduate religion module also existed at the Universities of Stellenbosch, the Western Cape, and the Free State. Between 1970-1980 a specialisation honours option in religion was offered by the Universities of Port Elizabeth, Fort Hare, Stellenbosch (1964), South Africa (1950-1993), Western Cape (1972-80), Free State (1985), and Durban-Westville (1981). By 1989 five out of twenty-two sociology departments still offered this Honours specialisation (Van Rensburg, 1989: 85). At the University of the Witwatersrand

(Wits) religion survived in a 1996 postgraduate course on rightwing social movements offered by Jonathan Hyslop.

But by 1997 only three sociology departments offered optional "sociology of religion" courses: Rhodes (East London), Transkei, and Zululand. By 1998 only one out of 23 sociology departments in South Africa presented "sociology of religion" to undergraduates (Huguenot College), and only one a non-optional course on "belief systems" that included an introduction to sociology of religion (Western Cape).

In 2001 the situation has improved only marginally for undergraduates. Huguenot offers sociology of religion, and Rhodes, Unitra, Wits and UWC offer optional modules. At the University of Western Cape, *Ritual, Symbolism and Belief Systems* has become an optional module across three programmes in the Arts Faculty. At the University of the Witwatersrand religion has been re-introduced, due at least in part to the absorption of the Department of Religious Studies into the sociology department. In Wits' 2001 sociology curriculum, *Sociology of Religion* is noted as an option for 2<sup>nd</sup> year and Honours students, while an optional module for 3<sup>rd</sup> years addresses *Power, Religion, Gender*. Rhodes' East London campus and Unitra are the only other departments that offer a postgraduate sociology of religion option.

The decline of the relevance of religion for sociologists is mirrored in the small number of sociologists who declare the topic as a research interest. Of an estimated 245 faculty members recorded in the South African Sociological Association's 1997 Directory, for instance, only five declared religion as interest (see Venter 1997).

A scrutiny of Masters' theses and Doctorates awarded between 1969-1995 confirmed that sociology of religion peaked in popularity between 1971-74, when senior postgraduate sociology students produced 15 degrees that emphasised religion. Twenty-two degrees with such topics were awarded in all between 1970-1979. The relative significance that religion achieved in sociology departments of the 1970s was partly due to the interest in this field taken by certain prominent sociologists and their students. During this period, for example, the sociology department at the University of the Witwatersrand included T Dunbar Moodie, who as head of department in 1975 produced a seminal work on Afrikaner civil religion (Moody 1975). Similarly, Gerhard Schutte, while head of the same department between 1978-87, completed research on religion and culture among the Venda (1982).

Sociologists at the University of the Orange Free State probably produced more research on religion than any other sociology department. Between 1939-1989 thirteen popular and academic pieces appeared with religion as focus, and sixteen senior postgraduate degrees on this topic were awarded (Van Rensburg 1990: 83). In 1983 the department of sociology at the university established a Sociology of Church and Religion research unit under Jan Coetzee (Van

Rensburg 1990: 4). Coetzee played a significant role from 1983 to 1985 in what became the Human Sciences Research Council's nationwide research project on *Religion, social change, and intergroup relations* (Van Rensburg 1990: 4). The unit closed in 1987 after Coetzee left to become department head at Rhodes (Van Rensburg 1990: 4).

But the relative unimportance of religion in sociology is underscored when the number of postgraduate degrees that emphasise religion are compared to the total output of sociology degrees. Between 1969-1995, sociology students and faculty completed 45 studies on religion, which makes up 7.4% of an overall figure of 609 sociology degrees (426 MAs, 183 PhDs – excluding 270 MAs and 72 PhDs still in progress). Between 1983-1987, eight degrees (2 PhDs, 6 MAs) that emphasised religion were granted out of a total of 201 in sociology (55 PhDs, 146 MAs) – i.e. roughly 4% (Van Rensburg, 1990: 115).

By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, religion's position within South African sociology had dwindled to a presence in a handful of departments as a submodule, typically located in first year teaching on the institutions of society.

### ***Reasons for the dwindling importance of religion in sociology***

Sociology presented a progressively more indifferent setting for the study of religion due to subdisciplinary reprioritisation that occurred within the discipline; intra- and interdepartmental shifts that affected staff and student numbers; and changes in the institutional setting of universities that pushed for more marketable topics.

The relevance of religion declined in the first place due to developments within sociology, which was supported by the rise to prominence of Marxist theory in South African sociology. The Marxist view of religion as a peripheral phenomenon was bound to affect the place of religion within the discipline. Significantly, the rise of Marxism in the sociology departments at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and of Cape Town coincided with the decline of sociology of religion there.

But the disappearance of sociology of religion was also during my survey of sociology departments linked by a respondent to "disciplinary prioritisation" – the growth of certain subdisciplines at the expense of others. Industrial sociology especially achieved an increasing prominence from the 1980s on, due to the adversarial role toward the apartheid regime assumed by the rising trade union movement. Industrial sociology achieved independence status for a while at the University of the Free State, and still does at the University of Potchefstroom's Vaal Triangle campus. As a result of this reprioritisation, some subdisciplines became the special interests of only a few, while others achieved a pre-eminence within South African sociology. Significantly in terms of our discussion, from the 1970s onwards religion was considered primarily in terms of whether it contributed to or inhibited political change.

In this hostile climate, and in competition with other subdisciplines, sociology of religion became "only one of many options, and so it fell away", a respondent to my survey concluded. This was the case at the Universities of Cape Town (UCT), Western Cape (UWC), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and the Free State (UFS), where sociology of religion was not deliberately jettisoned, "it just worked out that way", according to a respondent. But religion in any case lacked support in other quarters. A respondent indicated that religion had "not enjoyed overmuch prominence in the [old predominantly Afrikaans] Suid-Afrikaanse Sosiologiese Vereniging (SASOV) or [the old predominantly English] Association of Sociology of South Africa (ASSA)".

Student demand dropped because both Christians and Muslims who were deeply religious objected to sociology of religion, because, in the words of a respondent, "sociology is in essence secular and cosmopolitan". Such students were taught by white male South African sociologists who represented a segment of society that is secularising at a faster rate than other racial groupings. But even black sociologists ignored the study of traditional belief systems. In the opinion of another respondent, sociology of religion may have achieved a greater vitality if African belief systems were catered for.

Developments within sociology were affected in turn by changes in the external socio-political institutional settings within which universities – and ultimately sociology departments – function. The most important pressures exerted on universities were to decrease academic staff, to produce courses that prepare students for the employment market, and to compete with other universities for dwindling student numbers. Respondents suggested that specialisation subjects – like sociology of religion – are difficult to sustain due to the small size of departments, relative to the large number of students. The loss of a staff member means the abrupt end of a specialisation. As a result, because there is no sociology of religion courses, no one trains in this area.

### ***How relevant should religion be to sociology?***

I want to reiterate what I have argued elsewhere: that South African sociologists' lack of interest in studying religion ultimately harms the discipline of sociology more than it does other disciplines. Sociology suffers most because an important social factor is ignored in sociological analysis. In the process the analytical reach of sociology is severely curtailed and the theoretical contributions that could result from the study of religion, as the founding figures of sociology demonstrated, are lost.

The reluctance of South African sociologists does not prevent other disciplines from taking up sociological theories and associated empirical methods in the study of religion. Significant work on religion has been produced in history (Elphick & Davenport 1998), comparative religion (Chidester 1996), practical theology (Hendriks 1995), and missiology (Anderson 1992). Valuable opportu-

nities to interact with their empirical findings, or with those rare instances of sociological research on religion, have not been taken up by sociologists. Anderson's empirical research on African Pentecostal churches in Shoshanguve begs for a sociological explanation of why his findings differ from West (1975) on Soweto and Kiernan (1990) on KwaMashu. The challenge of interrogating Morran & Schlemmer's (1984) sociological study of how pentecostalism in Natal dampens political participation and awareness was, significantly, taken up by a historian, Hexham (1992). And Chidester's challenging interpretation of violence as public ritual (1992) met with a resounding sociological silence.

There are several reasons why sociologists should study religion, not least because some of sociology's founders did, and in so doing contributed to the development of major theories which are still used today.

The sociology of religion could contribute much to the subdisciplines of sociology itself, as I pointed out elsewhere. The role of religious beliefs in local trade union meetings could interest industrial sociologists. Urban sociologists could become aware of how urban religious movements attempt to rejuvenate inner cities. Sociologists of development could trace the link between development and religion, sketched by Evans e.a. (1992). Medical sociologists could benefit from attention to the role of indigenous health care systems, as sociologists at the University of the Free State demonstrated. And political sociologists could give thought to the role of religion in rightwing movements (Hyslop 1996), as sociologists of "deviance" could to the interaction between religion and violence in a movement like People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad).

Sociologists should study the topic because religion is one of the largest social institutions in South African society, drawing millions of participants. South Africans are remarkably more religious than the citizens of most other industrial or post-industrial societies. A study conducted in July 1993 by the Human Sciences Research Council showed that about 92% of all South Africans claimed to be Christian (Zaaiman 1994). Formal church membership shows a strong long-term upward historical trend, due to the conversion of millions of black South Africans to Christianity in the twentieth century. In 1911 only 25% of all blacks belonged to organised Christian denominations (Chidester 1992: 74). In a 1995 World Values Study, 81% of South African respondents reported that they considered themselves to be religious, with 98% of those surveyed stating they believed in God, and 70.7% rating God's importance to them as 10 on a scale of 1-10 (where 10 equals "very important").

Sociologists should also study religion in South Africa because of its political and cultural functions. The political function of religion is to support or to oppose particular political ideologies. The cultural defensive – or offensive – function of religion emerges in the various responses by indigenous traditional religions to Westernised Christianity. These reactions range from assimilation to accommodation to rejection.



Finally, sociologists should study religion because religion provides a microprism through which macro-changes can be traced, as the overview in the next section suggests.

## **The Relevance of Sociology of Religion for the Study of Change in South Africa**

If sociology regards the study of religion as irrelevant, should scholars of religion disregard sociology? After all, sociology is considered by some to be inimical to religion, as sociologists tend to favour functionalist explanations over substantive interpretations. As one sociologist himself remarked to me, sociological theories about religion tend to either exclude the reasons supplied by the faithful or to downplay the possibility of the existence of a supernatural dimension. The latter at least can be explained by the insistence in sociology on the empirical, which places arguments about the existence of the supernatural – as opposed to their function – beyond the scope of the discipline.

### ***The relevance of sociology of religion for understanding local changes***

As a sociologist-religionist who values empirical evidence, allow me to argue the case for the relevance of a sociology of religion for understanding change in South Africa. I will refer to actual studies carried out by sociologists to illustrate my case, with reference to political change (Linde & Zaaiman 1998), policy in relation to gender equity (Swemmer e.a. 1998), economic change (Garner 1998), and changes in racial integration (Venter 1995). In my understanding, as I will show later, these issues are interrelated, although the cases I have in mind accentuate one form of change. The examples show that we should rather speak of *changes*, for there have been several, and they are all mirrored in the structures and dynamics of religious institutions. For example, there have been several economic changes over the past two hundred years, and historical-materialists would alert us to the fact that such tectonic changes bring about shifts in consciousness and, subsequently, in forms of religious organisation.

The first example concerns a study of the impact of political change on church affiliation by Linde and Zaaiman (1998) among white Afrikaners. The researchers examined changes in membership of a large Pentecostal congregation in Cape Town. They found that a large percentage of those who attend the Pentecostal congregation used to affiliate with the white Dutch Reformed Church. While Linde and Zaaiman's sample of one congregation is not generalisable to all Afrikaners, they cast doubt on claims from within the Dutch Reformed Church that recent decreases in membership can be explained by the decline in birth rate among whites. Instead, Linde and Zaaiman suggested, switching membership to a denomination that emphasises that spiritual power is available to the indi-

vidual can be explained by white Afrikaners' loss of collective power in the political domain.

In the second example, Swemmer et al. (1998) examined the impact on a Coloured Uniting Reformed congregation of positive changes in the national context in the form of legislation and the establishment of a commission to promote gender equity. Swemmer found that while the denomination's commitment to gender equity in principle had filtered down to congregations, there was little evidence that this policy had affected practice. Few females are ministers in the denomination, while in a local congregation that Swemmer studied both men and women constructed gender in a way that continued to reserve certain roles for men and others for women.

While these examples ostensibly demonstrate change in state policies, they also indicate that sociology of religion is useful for understanding that changes at one level do not necessarily translate into changes at another level. A good example is Swemmer's work, which shows why changes in national legislation gender equity do not translate into a redefinition of gender roles in local congregations. My own investigation of how language practices in multiracial congregations tend to favour English as language of interaction despite attempts within the constitution and other bodies to enhance multilingualism, is another case in point.

The examples offered so far demonstrate how empirical research can be combined with sociological theories to illustrate the extent to which national changes affect local organisations.

The following instances show that both primary and tertiary research on local religious phenomena can be combined with sociological theories to demonstrate how national and local changes link to global changes.

### ***The relevance of sociology of religion for linking local to global changes***

I demonstrate in this section how the relevance of sociology of religion to the understanding of local changes in South Africa can be enhanced by awareness of potential linkages with global tendencies, such as the apparent trend toward cultural, political, and economic homogenisation.

In what follows I reprise my use of evidence from two cases that I studied in order to ascertain whether local changes in religious institutions demonstrate a general movement towards greater cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity within the world system. In general terms I consider the effect on local belief systems of South Africa's incorporation into global structures and processes, noting the long-term consequences of economic, political, and cultural globalisation on religious and cultural diversity. The case studies happen to include two particularly topical issues, namely interaction between racial groups and the growth of AICs. I had previously investigated each case separately, but recently attempted to refine and extend my findings by placing them within the theoretical framework

of a world system that is constituted partly by a global economy and partly by global norms.

Underlying my analysis is an eclectic world system perspective which ties selected aspects of world-economy and world-polity theories together and also pays attention to globalisation. By *world system* (without a hyphen) I mean a global collective reality which influences the structure and interaction of nation-states, national economies and cultures (cf. Boswell & Bergesen, 1987: 4). To avoid confusion, I will use world-economy when I refer to Immanuel Wallerstein's conception of the world-system (with a hyphen) in terms of capitalism.

The first case study examines the effects of the dominance of core culture on recent language practices in Christian congregations of six mainline denominations. Here South Africa's incorporation into the global norms that govern the *world-polity* appears more relevant.

My selection of the Christian denominations was based on two factors. First, the combined total of people that they contain represent a significance proportion of South African society. For instance, three (the Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist Churches) have a combined affiliation of 7,25 million people – about 26% of the total South African population, and 28% of all South African Christians (Human Science Research Council Omnibus Survey 1993). My second motive was to find racially-mixed congregations which, by implication, would be multilingual.

In the second case study I examine the effect of South Africa's incorporation and changing position in the *world-economy* on indigenous belief systems, with reference to the emergence of the African Indigenous Churches in a particular region. I analyse the latter cultural shift in terms of South Africa's initial peripheral incorporation and subsequent movement into the semi-periphery.

A focus on AICs as a form of African religion is easily justified by noting that South Africans are religious; most South Africans are African; and the largest religious group among black South Africans are the African Indigenous Churches. South African AICs are unique but not unique: there are many indigenous churches in Africa, and many more across the world. Indigenous churches can consequently be regarded as part of the worldwide growth of new religious movements (e.g. Benetta Jules-Rosette 1989). So when we discuss AICs we are focusing on a local example of a global trend, which means that the examples we look at may be unique to South Africa in some ways, but may also contain similarities to other religious groups elsewhere.

A second reason why a focus on AICs is suited to our topic is that their emergence can be explained as one of the outcomes of large-scale cultural, political, and economic changes. Scholars typically associate the rise of AICs with the impact of a capitalist economy, a colonial political structure, and an alien religious belief system on African societies. I am not suggesting that AICs emerged for the same reasons and in the same manner everywhere. The variation

among AICs in relation to historical changes and to location should be accounted for in any attempt to construct a theory about their origin and development. Also, the factors that lead to the emergence of AICs are not necessarily those which sustain it, or even that characterise later stages of its history (Daneel 1987: 68). For instance, Ethiopian churches emerged as a response of protest against white domination, and initially expressed a pan-Africanist desire for liberation which slowly dissipated, and is currently missing from Ethiopian churches (Daneel 1987: 38, 51). Yet among the Shona AICs of Zimbabwe protest did not play a significant causal role, nor did AICs in West Africa arise due to socio-political, economic, or ethnic factors (Daneel 1987: 71, 100, referring to Harold Turner 1967). For Daneel AICs represent security in "the midst of crumbling traditional structures" (Daneel 1987: 71).

Various explanations for the emergence of AICs fit loosely into two important social science perspectives, namely functionalism and conflict theory. To these two, can be added Max Weber's perspectives on the way religion relates to society; specifically, to its economics. Robert Garner (1998) summarised these three approaches respectively as (a) *functionalist approaches* in which religion is perceived as serving certain adaptive social purposes in the context of certain social and economic realities and (b) *materialist treatments*, in which religion is seen as the product of social and economic realities. For Garner (1998) scholars operating within this framework draw "attention to the strong connection between economic location and affiliation". They tend to explain AICs "in terms of the phases of capitalist development in South Africa". In the *idealist perspective* "religion is viewed as independent of social and economic realities, but acts upon and modifies them". Some would argue that this is where Max Weber's work fits in. Garner recently completed a significant recent project that fits into this perspective. His work inter alia examines the economic effects of affiliation in Apostolic- and Zionist-type churches.

I discuss each case in more detail, starting with the study of language usage in Christian congregations before moving on to my re-examination of the emergence of AICs.

### Case Study One: Linguistic Integration in Mainline Christian Congregations<sup>4</sup>

In this case I examined the effects of the world system on recent language practices in Christian congregations of eight denominations: the Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist Churches; the (pentecostal-oriented) International Federation of Christian Churches (IFCC) and Full Gospel Churches; and one case each of Independent, Presbyterian, and Free Methodist Churches.

My discussion is based on a 1997 postal survey in which I studied language usage in sixty racially and linguistically diverse congregations. Of these, 21 (35%)

were Anglican (Church of the Province of South Africa) congregations, 9 Methodist (Methodist Church of Southern Africa) congregations (15%), and 20 Roman Catholic (33%). Most had been formerly segregated, while a few had always been racially mixed.

Together they serve as examples of voluntary organisations *without* a formal language policy, which falls outside direct control of the state as far as language practice is concerned. Theoretically, which languages are used in services (e.g. English, Zulu) is much more open to negotiation in these religious settings than in the public sector or in schools. At the same time churches are not unconnected to other dynamics and institutions, and their members do not leave either ideological persuasions or social identities at the door.

Congregations were asked to indicate the approximate percentage of first-language speakers in their respective congregations. Ten of South Africa's eleven official languages were distributed over 59 congregations who completed valid responses. The number of first languages in any particular congregation ranged from two to eleven (excluding foreign languages). The presence of up to four first languages in a congregation was fairly common. Forty-five congregations (76,3% of all congregations) contained one to four first-languages; twelve (20,3%) had between five to eight; and two (3,4%) had nine to twelve first languages. Five congregations (8,5%) had five languages, and four (6,8%) comprised six first language-speakers as congregants. In terms of African languages, Zulu was spread over twenty-three congregations, Xhosa over eighteen; Sotho over fifteen; Tsonga over six; Swazi over five; Shangaan, like Pedi, over four; Tswana over three; Venda over two. Other African first-language speakers were distributed over seventeen congregations (29% of congregations surveyed).

Table 1 shows the extent of linguistic integration in each congregation, described in terms of an index, constructed from measures of five language categories. The number of *language groups* present in each congregation was decided by responses to a question which asked for indications of the percentages of congregants who spoke any of thirteen first languages. While the given percentages could be dismissed as "guesstimates", the number of language groups identified is likely to be underestimated. This is because respondents were conceivably only aware of the languages of members with whom they had had contact; additional languages may have been present.

**Table 1: Language integration index:**  
 number of languages in congregation and number used in services (N=51)

| <i>Level of integration (index)</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>Number of languages in congregation<sup>b</sup></i> | <i>Number of languages used in service</i> | <i>N as % of responses</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|--|--|----------------------------|
| Poorly integrated                   | 23       | Three or more (multilingual)                           | One (monolingual)                          | 45.1%                      |
| Somewhat integrated                 | 9        | Two (bilingual)  | One (monolingual)                          | 17.6%                      |
|                                     | 13       | Three or more (multilingual)                           | Two (bilingual)                            | 25.5%                      |
| Well integrated                     | 4        | Two (bilingual)  | Two (bilingual)                            | 7.8%                       |
|                                     | 2        | Three or more (multilingual)                           | Three or more (multilingual)               | 3.9%                       |

Source: Own Data, 1997.

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Nine cases were discarded for including invalid or no response to the three categories.

<sup>b</sup> Number of first languages spoken by congregants.

**Table 2: Number of languages used in services**  
 by number of congregations (N=51)<sup>a</sup>

|                                     | <i>Sermons</i> | <i>Liturgy</i> | <i>Prayers</i> | <i>Hymns</i> | <i>Readings</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| <b>One language used</b>            | 37             | 32             | 31             | 30           | 29              |
|                                     | 72.5%          | 62.7%          | 60.8%          | 58.8%        | 56.9%           |
| <b>Two languages used</b>           | 13             | 16             | 17             | 17           | 19              |
|                                     | 25.5%          | 31.4%          | 33.3%          | 33.3%        | 37.3%           |
| <b>Three or more languages used</b> | 1              | 3              | 3              | 4            | 3               |
|                                     | 2%             | 5.9%           | 5.9%           | 7.8%         | 7.8%            |

Source: Own Data, 1997.

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Nine cases were discarded for including invalid or no response to the three categories

Three rankings were devised from the data, based on the configuration of languages in services and on first languages spoken by members of the congregation. These included (a) a multilingual-monolingual configuration, which I classified as "poorly" integrated; (b) bilingual-monolingual or multilingual-bilingual arrangements, regarded as "somewhat" integrated; (c) multilingual-multilingual or

bilingual-bilingual groupings, categorised as "well-integrated". In other words, churches were regarded as linguistically "well-integrated" when the number of languages in services corresponded directly to the number of language groups present. In linguistically "poorly" integrated churches the disparity between the languages used in services and languages present in the congregations were greater than those which were placed in the "somewhat" integrated ranking. The linguistic integration index (Table 1) shows that six congregations could be ranked as "well-integrated", while 22 were "somewhat" and 23 were "poorly" integrated.

Table 2 reveals more clearly what Table 1 disguises to a certain extent: that monolingual services are the norm in multilingual congregations. Table 2 shows the more detailed picture which emerges when the number of languages used in services (column three in Table 1) is broken down into its five constituent parts. Of the fifty-one valid responses in answer to the question "how many languages were used in sermons", 72.5% (37 cases) had monolingual preaching only. By comparison 27.5% cases did not – including thirteen which had bilingual (25.5%) and 1 (2%) multilingual sermons. The language of preference was usually English.

Most congregations prefer monolingual sermons, so that English predominates as language of choice in multilingual settings. Seventy-four percent of respondents indicated that their congregations preferred to use only one language for preaching sermons, usually English, regardless of the relative size of the other language groups. Congregations that used other languages tended to use two, and can accordingly be characterised as bilingual. Very few cases of multilingual language usage in congregations were found.

## Case Study Two: The Emergence of Zionist-Apostolic Churches in the Transkei

Here I explore the systemic effects of South Africa's initial peripheral incorporation and subsequent movement into the semi-periphery through an examination of the emergence of African Indigenous Churches (AICs). Specifically, I examine De Wet's (1994) analysis of Zionist-Apostolic churches in the Transkei region along South Africa's southeastern seaboard, inhabited primarily by Xhosa-speakers. De Wet's work suggests that the growth of a migratory labour force and the increasing hegemony of Western cultural forms contributed significantly to the emergence of AICs.

In South Africa, African Indigenous Churches (AICs) are commonly grouped into Ethiopians, Apostolics, and Zionists, according to ontological, historical, doctrinal, and class differences. *Ethiopian* churches were the first to emerge in South Africa, and exhibited anti-racist and Pan-Africanist tendencies. Yet they retained the organisation and doctrines of the white-dominated Protestant churches from which they broke away. Most Ethiopian churches were founded between 1884-1900, and arguably were most influential from 1872-1928 (Kruss, 1985:

80). Ethiopian leaders formed part of an emerging black bourgeoisie. *Zionist* churches emerged later, particularly between 1917-1920, are pentecostal, emphasise healing, and wear distinctive uniforms. Initial membership consisted of semi-educated black peasants, who emphasised establishing a self-supporting religious community on their own land (Kruss, 1985: 125,137). *Zionist-Apostolic* churches emerged from the 1940s to the present, embraced by the impoverished landless black working class (Kruss, 1985: 73,152). *Zionist-Apostolics* lay claim to Apostolic succession, in which the authority of leaders are seen to derive directly from Christ's Twelve Apostles (compare Sundkler 1961: 38-59; West 1975: 190; Garner 1998).

AICs form the largest single religious grouping in South Africa. Estimates of AIC affiliation in South Africa currently stand at over 10,6 million people, based on 1996 census data (Anderson 1992: 59). This translates into 26.3% of all South African Christians, and almost one out of every three black Africans (Chidester 1992: 114; Zaaiman 1994: 570). At present there are more than 6 000 AIC denominations in South Africa, located mostly in the central and northern parts – i.e. the Free State and former Transvaal areas (Zaaiman 1994: 572). AICs are more numerous in South Africa than anywhere else on the continent (Daneel 1987: 43). Between 1932 and 1960 AICs increased by 56%, with *Zionist-Apostolic* titled churches noticeably prevalent after 1945 (Kruss 1985: 159,165).

Indigenous churches emerged in South Africa during the late colonial period (1880-1925), coinciding with the peak of the simultaneous globalisation of European forms of Christianity and of the European capitalism that Wallerstein traces back to the 16th century. This period also saw the discovery of precious minerals and stones in South Africa, followed by the formation of the first mining companies, and the development of a system of migrant labour across southern Africa, to extract them. Mining, in other words, was an exploitative function of the core in relation to the periphery in the global economy. By the end of the 19th century, European forms of economy and religion had achieved hegemony in Africa. But with the decline of Britain from the 1880s onward, US religious forms (particularly pentecostalism) penetrated Africa in competition with British Christianity.

During the 19th century the Xhosa developed two cultural responses in reaction to colonialism: a traditionally-oriented Babomvu (or "Red") worldview and a Christian-oriented "School" worldview (De Wet 1994: 139). At first the Babomvu were in the majority, managing to maintain traditional cultural practices by shunning Christianity and Western education. Babomvu would not allow their children to mix with School children, and resisted being drawn into the emerging migrant-labour system. Most Babomvu could make a subsistence living on ancestral lands, and practised traditional beliefs and cult. Thus their economic, religious, kinship, and political systems remained intact, insulated by



the remoteness of their rural homesteads. The low numbers of people who affiliated to Christianity illustrates this. For example, as recently as the 1960s, 77% of the indigenous people living in the eastern Transkei claimed no church affiliation, while the overall figures for rural Transkei areas were between 41,8% and 48% (De Wet 1994: 145,149).

Towards the end of the 19th century, social change in the Transkei happened as a result of the cumulative effect of a number of events. A severe drought, crop failure, and cattle disease destroyed the economic base of the Babomvu culture. Slowly the Babomvu were drawn into migrant labour and a monetary economy for short periods. While living in towns as migrants, they continued to practise a cultural separatism and consumer asceticism towards all things Western, so that the essential features of the Babomvu ideology remained intact (De Wet 1994: 137,146). The Babomvu ideology was retained through the development of rites of passage, departure, and purification – which cast the new migratory experience in a traditional light (McAllister 1980; De Wet 1994: 147).

As part of a development programme called the Betterment Schemes, people were moved in the 1950s and 1960s from their traditional homesteads into towns. Their land-based ancestral cult and kinship-based ritual and political structures were severely disrupted (De Wet 1994: 151). Thus the material and relational bases underpinning the Babomvu worldview were substantially weakened. Their geographical insulation was broken with the extension of roads, telephones, radio services, and education systems throughout the Transkei (De Wet 1994: 150). No longer able to survive through subsistence, they became increasingly drawn into migrant labour. The longer absences of males from home made maintaining the ancestral cult even more difficult.

De Wet periodises the emergence of Zionist affiliates in the Transkei as follows. Zionist churches emerged in the early 1930s, but became visible only in the 1950s; and grew significantly between 1960 and 1980. Dependency on wage labour increased between 1910 and 1930, so that by the late 1930s about a quarter of all economically active males were involved. This period saw the emergence of a small number of Zionist churches in the Transkei.

Labour migrancy was spurred on by the implementation of Betterment Schemes from the 1950s on, coinciding with an increase in Zionist affiliation. By the 1980s some 80% of all males over the age of 16 were engaged in migrant labour; by which time 10-15% of the population of the Transkei had affiliated to AICs – of which 71% were Zionist-Apostolic. Evidence suggests that Zionist churches sprang up across Southern Africa after migrant labourers encountered Zionist evangelists at their places of work. These new converts exported the faith back to their home regions in Botswana, Swaziland, and Zambia. For example, in Zimbabwe, Zionist churches were founded by returned migrant labourers (e.g. Makamba, Mtisi, Masuka) who had worked in South Africa during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There they had encountered the Zion Apostolic Church

(est. 1917) and the Zion Apostolic Faith Mission (Daneel 1987: 54-5).

In short, initially the Babomvu were able to resist altering their traditional structures and belief systems by sustaining their material conditions and cultural isolation, supported by the construction of a vigorous worldview. During the subsequent phase the material and political bases of the Babomvu were undermined, causing alterations in ritual and social patterns. Finally, due to increasing participation in migrant labour and cultural pressure, the Babomvu had to abandon most of their old worldview for a Zionist-Apostolic ideology, yet managed to retain some older ritual aspects (De Wet 1994: 154).

De Wet interprets the cultural shift as occurring in a situation of extreme social change, where the worldview of the Abantu Babomvu could no longer adequately service their altered needs. They rejected three other options: (a) to assimilate to Western culture; (b) to opt for the mission Christianity of the School people; (c) to accept the Ethiopian alternative, which meant the radical rejection of ancestral beliefs. Instead, they adopted Zionism as a midway route between preserving selected traditional practices and an Africanised Christianity (De Wet 1994: 152).

### Cultural Change In the Two Case Studies from a World System Perspective

The Zionist-Apostolic case study implies that the global system will lead to neither increasing cultural homogeneity, heterogeneity – or both – but to hybridisation.

More accurately, Zionist-Apostolics represent a singular identity as the outcome of a weaker movement within the global system during a particular historical period towards cultural homogenisation, alongside a stronger process of heterogenization, in which the one process restrains the other.

The emergence of Zionist-Apostolic churches in the Transkei signalled increased cultural heterogeneity within South African society in the form of a further subdivision of the Xhosa along socially constructed fault lines of space and class. Zionist-Apostolic churches allowed some Xhosa (primarily resident in the Transkei) to fashion a singular new identity in opposition to other Xhosa (resident primarily in the Ciskei) as well as to other forms of Christianity. In a cultural trade-off, aspects of older forms of ritual and beliefs were combined with those of a newer belief system in a reconstructed cultural singularity.

In other words, globalised systems of governance, education, and religion had different effects on the same ethnic group (Xhosa-speakers) along diverging class lines. The systemic effect of the economic integration of Africa as a periphery into global capitalism was to create the range of classes across the continent which embraced or resisted *cultural* homogeneity. The South African bourgeoisie of the mid-1800s and the semi-educated black peasants of ca. 1917 symboli-

cally resisted globalisation through the creation of the Ethiopian and Zionist churches. By contrast, assimilation alienated black South African elites from the political struggles of the 1960s townships (Brandel-Syrier 1978).

But Africans did not become wholly homogenised. Instead, they became more or less homogenous according to their class positions, rejecting more or fewer aspects of their cultures. Yet they never completely moved into their newer identities nor out of their older ones. In South Africa Zionist churches provided a way of affirming and adapting selected aspects of localised identities, while orientating believers to a modernising present. Increased *religious* heterogeneity occurred in the emergence of an additional form of Christianity. Yet in accepting some aspects of Christianity, Zionist-Apostolics were paradoxically linked to the very homogenising globalised identity (Christianity) that they were resisting.

By contrast the case study of linguistic integration suggests a trend towards the dominance of homogenising processes over weaker heterogenising forces at a particular historical moment. The predominance of English in multilingual congregations in South Africa is linked to the cultural norms which govern world-political institutions. Formal and popular language ideologies favouring the dominance of English alongside a weaker recognition of other languages emerged at the global level in a world language system. At the same time a similar local language ideology developed among the political elite. The global and local language ideologies articulate with one other, and together contribute to cultural and structural isomorphism across state and civil institutions. Consequently English is regarded, globally and locally, as a language of access to employment, commerce and status. But the language ideology that favours English operates among the general populace as well, due to the popular resistance to Afrikaans during the anti-apartheid struggle.

Linguistic configurations similar to those in South Africa appear across the rest of Africa. Official state policies and practices, as well as constitutions, deal in similar terms with language diversity in sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Africa and South Africa. Almost all states claim to support indigenous languages, but in practice opt for a European language associated with former colonists. Such contradictory policies/practices by states and populations can be related to the contradictions within the world-economy and within the world polity. This is particularly true of former British colonies such as Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Botswana, and Swaziland. Yet similarities between former British colonies and other non-English African countries – such as Mozambique and Benin – increases the extent to which the South African case is generalisable.

Similarity in linguistic practices across Africa suggest that two forms of cultural isomorphism function to affect language practice. First, cultural isomorphism *between nation-states* (e.g. South Africa and Botswana) in the form of convergence around linguistic practices which devalues indigenous languages. Second, cultural isomorphism *between institutions within a nation-state* in the

form of convergence around linguistic ideologies, which contradict language practices across institutions – e.g. between state departments and non-state controlled organisations, such as schools and churches.

Many African Christians in Ethiopian AICs as well as those in most contemporary mainline congregations construct dual identities between which they oscillate, in contrast to the singular identity of Zionist-Apostolics. Put crudely, globalised identities (Western, Christian, English) become dominant in many *public* settings, while localised identities (African, traditional, vernacular) become secondary and *privatised*. Statistically there is little evidence in census data to suggest that the acceptance of the dominance of English is accompanied by a loss of indigenous languages. Whether this is still the case for the present and especially the subsequent generation of urban Africans, who have greater access to English language schools, remains to be seen.

The two cases can be compared to African Pentecostal Christianity, which represents a completely homogenised religio-cultural identity. Older forms of belief and ritual are completely rejected, and replaced by a singular modernising identity. In a 1990-91 study of the black township of Soshanguve, near Pretoria, Allan Anderson found that African Pentecostals<sup>7</sup> have “almost totally rejected traditional religious practices”. By implication they have disengaged themselves “from the social practices connected with the ancestral cult” (Anderson 1992: 75). That is, they do not revere ancestors, engage in ritual killing, or consult diviners. Pentecostal churches do not use traditional symbolic objects, nor traditional African musical instruments (like drums) in their services. African Pentecostals are opposed to polygamy, to drinking traditional beer associated with ancestral rituals, smoking, while many avoid eating pork (Anderson 1992: 74-75).

### Concluding Comments about Sociology, Religion and the Study of Change

Sociology of religion is irrelevant to the study of South African society in sociology, measured by the number of postgraduate degrees awarded, courses offered, and articles published. Sociology of religion should be relevant, given the number of South Africans affiliated to this institution, which provides researchers with a microprism that is sensitive to change, e.g. presence of migrants, grassroots development projects, the effects of political systems on religious affiliation (Linde & Zaaiman 1998), or of religions on economic behaviour (Garner 1998).

The relevance of sociology of religion for investigating how local changes respond to global trends can be demonstrated in a study of how political and economic changes affect religious organisation by reference to the world system. This is clear from our examination of how global norms affect language practice in local congregations, and how the expansion and integration of the world-economy contribute to the emergence of AICs.

I personally believe that research that examines the local-global interaction should receive priority in research on religions, given the emergence of various movements across the world that promote and oppose the present form of economic globalisation. The destruction of the World Trade Centre and a section of the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 arises at least partly in response to perceptions that the USA drives and benefits most from this system, to the detriment of certain regions. Events in the USA also suggest that religious-based opposition could lead to the most destructive forms of direct action against the present world system.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper synthesises several of my publications, most published in *Society in Transition*, the journal of the South African Sociological Association.
- <sup>2</sup> This section contains an abbreviated and updated version of my 1998 article, "Dissing the Sacred Canopy – the state of sociology of religion in South Africa." *Society in Transition* 29 (3-4): 143-151.
- <sup>3</sup> Sources included a list compiled by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), a sample of postgraduate sociology degrees from the three Western Cape universities, a 1972 bibliography of sociology of religion (Reinders & Welz 1972), and the University Theses and Dissertations (UTD) electronic database on the South African Bibliographic Network.
- <sup>4</sup> This section summarises two of my articles: (2000), "Cultural reproduction in the world system: case studies from a semiperiphery, 1872-1997". *Society in Transition* 31 (2): 184-195, and (1998) "Globalisation and African Indigenous Churches". *Missionalia* 26:3: 412-438.

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