

# The Micro-sociology of Religion: Religious Practices, Collective and Individual

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What do people do when they do religion? Especially, what are they doing during their most religious acts, those moments at the core of what people feel it means to be religious? The micro-sociological approach is to observe everything as closely as possible, to watch the action in the moments when it is taking place. What are they doing when they are praying? When last rites are administered to the dying? When the Buddhist monk has an enlightenment experience? When a Christian saint is touched by God? When someone is born again? There are social patterns in these and in a variety of practices that make up the micro action of religions.

Micro-sociology has special significance in the empirical basis of sociology, because everything that happens socially is in a here-and-now sequence of particular people in action. Meso and macro sociology are perspectives constructed from aggregating, comparing and abstracting micro-sociological evidence, including such banal processes as asking people questions and then subjecting the answers to mathematics, or verbally describing them in nouns referring to entities which are mostly not actually seen in visible micro-interactions. An intelligent use of micro-sociology does not polemically negate meso and macro sociologies; these perspectives show different things at their levels of analysis. The meso level of religion includes church organization, religious movements, religious demography, the entwining of religious with politics, etc; macro sociology of religion shows patterns of historical change, innovation, conflict, rise and fall, religious market processes and the place of religion in the social history of culture, states and economies.

Micro-sociology is above all a method. It pragmatically and open-endedly makes use of careful observation through ethnographic presence and participation, interviewing or de-briefing, and self-observation, as well as recent technologies for studying the details of human action in videos, sound recordings, time-diaries, and reports on interior dialogue. But observation without theoretical sensitivities is half-blind; fortunately we have an accumulation of theoretical work on micro observations that has been showing robust patterns.

I will emphasize interaction ritual theory based on Durkheim and Goffman, focusing on the relations between religious and secular rituals, and on what causes differing intensities of religious rituals; these enable us to see when religious practices succeed or fail socially-- when belief, enthusiasm, morality and community are stronger or weaker, growing or fading. Micro-sociological descriptions also point us to the operative differences among religions, and to their most consequential historical changes. I will also make use of theory and research on interior dialogue and the sociology of mind, a research lineage going back to Meadian symbolic interactionism, in order to understand prayer and mystical experience.

The term “ritual” has several senses. Sociologically, we should distinguish between formal ceremonial (whether religious, political, etiquette, etc.) and interaction ritual (IR) as a broader and more generic model of the solidarity-producing and symbol-sustaining actions of social life. Durkheim [1912/1964] described religious ritual as practices towards things which are sacred and set apart from ordinary profane life, things which have a value in themselves transcending the mundane and the practical. Abstracting from these, Goffman [1967] analyzed everyday secular life as organized by a set of interaction rituals which enact social relationships of varying degrees of intimacy and status from one encounter to another.

In *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Collins 2004), I set out the processual ingredients which make interaction rituals (IRs) succeed or fail, in different degrees, thereby producing different strengths of relationships, emotions, and respect for symbols. The success of a ritual depends upon (1) *bodily assembly* of participants; (2) *barriers excluding outsiders*; and above all the cumulative feedback between (3) *mutual focus of attention* and (4) a *shared emotional mood*. Traditional formalities are not essential, since they only help to keep the group focused by doing the same thing, “uttering the same cry” as Durkheim said, or going through the same motions together. What makes or breaks a ritual however is (4), the extent to which the group builds up a strong collective emotion. When this pervades individual consciousness, those persons assembled experience what Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” a feeling of being brought out of oneself into some larger and more powerful. In the broader sense of interaction rituals, this collective feeling may be many different emotions-- awe-struck, joyful, solemn, angry, laughing, fearful, sad. Thus the particular kind of emotion (ingredient 4) is crucial for making one ritual experience qualitatively different from another. The rituals of politics, the rituals of ordinary sociability, entertainment, erotics, etc. are distinguished from the rituals of religion; and different religions can have different emotional tones-- what Weber would call different “ethics” of life-conduct, because of their emotional ingredients.

Successful rituals produce the outcomes of (5) *membership* feelings, which are stored in (6) *sacred objects* or symbolic emblems; individuals are pumped up with (7) *emotional energy*-- confidence, enthusiasm in carrying out their repeated round of rituals and in a course of life-conduct oriented towards its symbolic goals; and the community is filled with (8) *moral feelings* of right and wrong, including righteous anger in punishing those who violate its symbolic code. Thus as Durkheim points out, all the key features of a strongly integrated society are produced by successful rituals.

Since ritual outcomes can vary from intense to mild to weak to non-existent, the strength of religious commitment, and of belief in religious symbols, rises and falls with the success of its interaction rituals. A new religion arises when a group formulates intense religious practices that bond them to a common identity and its symbolic emblems which carry their beliefs; it routinizes when its rituals have mild effects, perhaps interspersed with moments of enthusiasm; and it declines when its rituals go emotionally cold, leaving participants indifferent, and open to being recruited by rival ritual communities.

### *The Distinctiveness of Religious Rituals*

Having characterized generic interaction ritual leaves us with the question: what is distinctive about religious ritual? Two possible answers are: distinctive emotional experiences, or distinctive symbolic contents. Religious interaction ritual involves especially strong, even extreme, emotional experiences; these announce themselves as of the highest significance, transcending all other experiences, and give pervasive meaning to life. That is not to say that all or most religious rituals have these intense feelings, especially in the more routinized parts of religion; but these are the defining moments for religion, the ritual encounters with the holy to which other rituals look back if only in pale imitation.

A second answer is that religious rituals differ from secular ones in the content of the symbolism; since symbols are the medium through which we represent and communicate, they are the living experience of culture; a culture is alive only insofar as a body of symbols is used in meaningful social interactions. The cultural or symbolic content that makes religion distinctive from everything else, then, is announced in its symbols, which affirm the existence of a sacred realm explicitly higher than mundane life, although connected with it in specified ways. One difficulty with the cultural explanation of religious distinctiveness is that culture is derivative of ritual; as Durkheim and his followers have shown, symbols are created and sustained in rituals, and they die out when the rituals are no longer performed with sufficient emotional intensity. In this chicken-and-egg problem, the causal primacy is with the ritual action; to put this in theological language, the human experience of God is prior and fundamental to theology and belief. Theologians and story-tellers did not create God (and the historical variety of spirits), although once the ritual-based experiences of religious emotion exist, intellectual networks place their interpretations upon these experiences. But interaction rituals always occur in an on-going

chain, with prior IRs creating a heritage of symbols that feed into and provide the focus of attention for the next IR in the chain. Thus there is an ongoing feedback loop between cultural ideas of religious realities and the emotional experiences arising from ritual practice, ongoingly shaping each other. But beliefs are the weaker part of the chain, and they die when the ritual practice fails to support them.

A third distinctiveness of religious rituals is that they self-consciously link the community backwards to primordial time. In part this is spelled out in the content, the texts and comparisons referring back to religious history. But also it is an awareness of the rituals themselves as being carried on in unbroken succession, thereby reminding members of the community stretching across the ages, and implying its own transcendence of the present by continuing into the future until the end of the world. This is most characteristic of the Western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which by their textual focus and commemoration of historical/mythic events are constantly reminding their members of their intergenerational community. In contrast, secular rituals tend to be oriented fairly closely to the near present.

The difference between religious and secular life is somewhat overstated by Durkheim and other scholars before Goffman's discovery of the rituals of everyday life. In some historic societies, religion is indeed kept very distinct, treated with intense respect and divided from profane persons and things. But on the whole everything has its borderlines. In societies pervaded by practices of magic, sacred forces are invoked for mundane purposes; traditional religious ritual could also be treated as a form of entertainment, and pilgrimages could have the emotional tone of vacationing (as the reader of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* can see), and holy relics could be the object of commercial trade. In societies where religion was closely allied with the state and aristocracy, formal religious ceremonial was close in tone to good manners and to giving proper deference to social rank. Thus historic societies that we think of as permeated by religion had more secular or mundane rituals than we might suppose; they appeared highly religious because religious rituals had a near-monopoly, hence religious rituals were widely used for non-religious purposes.

Conversely, in modern secular societies there are specialized interaction rituals of entertainment, sports, politics, education, partying, erotics and other IRs which provide experiences of collective effervescence, social solidarity, emotional enthusiasm, and symbolic commitments. When people now seek these various ritual goods, they may well get them from modern secular rituals where traditional people had to get them in the guise of religious festivals, pilgrimages, etc. It is no exaggeration to say that Sunday football games cut into religious

belief as well as religious attendance, although on the other hand some athletes may clasp hands and pray on the playing field.

Sociologically, we should envision everyone as living in a field of possible rituals to choose among; it is not just rival religions which compete with one another in a religious marketplace, but secular and religious rituals compete with one another for adherents. In the religious marketplace, religions compete over which one provides the most successful IRs; this is the implicit mechanism of better market performance in the Finke and Stark [1992] theory. More broadly, all the spheres of life compete in a market for emotional energy. The differentiated field of modern rituals, however, is full of diverse niches, and consumers of rituals can partake of a variety of IRs; it is not necessarily the case that any particular variety of ritual monopolizes the ritual practices of the population. A variety of religious organizations-- purveyors of distinctive brands of rituals-- can maintain themselves simultaneously. But their ritual success in membership, belief, etc. has the same kinds of market growth and decline, innovations and bankruptcies as happen with commercial organizations purveying entertainment rituals, or social and political movements purveying rituals of group mobilization and competition for power. A secular world means, not the disappearance of religion but the loss of religious monopoly over rituals; still, there remains room for rituals which produce distinctively religious experiences. What these are is our next topic. For brevity, in what follows I will confine myself mainly to certain aspects of Christianity and Buddhism; there is much to be learned from applying micro-sociology to the variety of interaction rituals that constitute other religions.

### *Worship Rituals*

Two major kinds of religious practices are rituals of collective worship, and individual rituals of prayer and meditation. The ritual of worship is central in the Durkheimian perspective, since religion is the collectivity experiencing the power of its unified and focused self. Assembly for worship is the doctrinally central practice for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions and a number of others. The Presbyterian hymnal begins by saying: "Worship is the highest calling... What happens in corporate worship is a foretaste of and preparation for eternity as we join with all the saints surrounding the Lamb's throne to sing his glory!" [Trinity Hymnal. 1990: 9] Even

if the cosmic reality of the divine transcends the human, nevertheless it is through ritual assemblies that the divine is channeled.

Individual experience of prayer and meditation are celebrated as the highest breakthroughs into direct contact with religious reality, but these practices are not only comparatively rare, but are at least derivatively social. For one thing, prayer and meditation have ritualistic forms shared by a community; sometimes they are carried out collectively in a worship ceremony, and for most people this is where they are learned. One prays together before one prays alone. Meditation aimed at mystical experience is also learned collectively. Even in religions where meditative monks have the highest religious status, monks who meditate alone are initiated by other mediators; network analysis of mystics of Buddhist and Hindu traditions shows that the most famous mystics are closely connected to lineages of other famous mystics [Collins 1998: chapters 5-7]. Perhaps surprisingly to an outsider, Zen monks usually meditate together at regular hours in a collective meditation room; and although many famous mystics of several religions have had their highest experiences meditating in solitude, sometimes as hermits, these periods of solitude are largely an institutionalized tradition embedded within a collectively organized monastic career. Tensions do exist between the more solitary practices and the more collective ones. The famous ascetic “desert fathers” of the early Christian church were often regarded by the bishops as a threat to the discipline and unity of the church; but this was so not because the mystics were entirely isolated but because the desert monks tended to attract audiences of lay followers; and also the monks sometimes united in enthusiastic crowds which might descend on the cities and intervene in church disputes. Our ideal type image of the solitary mystic must be tempered by the empirical realities of the collective organization which supports and shapes individual mysticism. I will discuss the micro-sociology of mysticism and prayer at greater length below.

The ingredients which make up religious worship ritual-- assembly, barriers to outsiders, devices for focusing attention, the kinds of emotions shared and reverberated-- are causally effective not just for whether the ritual succeeds or fails in producing high levels of solidarity, commitment to symbols, emotional energy, and morality. Variations in the ingredients also determine the specific identity and character of particular religions and the religious experiences which their members undergo. Who assembles, and how often? How strong is the exclusion of outsiders from holy ceremonies and holy places? And is this exclusion a dichotomy of insiders and outsiders, or a series of ranks of closeness and distance? Focus of attention is mainly produced by ritual actions;

does everyone participate, or does a religious elite perform all or most of the ritual while the audience watches and follows? Where does the emotion come from: stirred up by a preacher? arising from the audience? from special occasions of life and death, threat and celebration? Such variables make the central difference in the histories of all religions. Moreover, since ritual sustains symbols and therefore beliefs, I will argue that it is differences in the rituals which produce the major differences in doctrine.

Consider the differences in ritual practice among Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity, both historically and today. Catholic worship is traditionally priest-led formal ceremony. Priests are clearly marked off from laity, both by costumes and ritually segregated spaces in the church; only priests can handle the holy implements; not only is there is an inner zone of physical sacred objects, but the vestments and to an extent even the body of the priest is made into a sacred object. Exceptional moments, such as the passing of bread and wine in the Holy Communion, allow only limited contact by the laity, who can touch these with their mouths but not with their hands, and this carefully guarded contact is considered the most holy. In the organization of ritual practice, the great emphasis on boundaries between the realm of the priest and the laity builds up special significance for those moments when crossing the boundary is the focus of attention. The boundary between inside and outside the church is also strongly marked, with ritual markers and sacred objects used at the crossing points, both entering and leaving: holy water, crossing oneself, kneeling in the direction of the sacred emblems. Some categories of persons are marked as exceptionally profane and thus must perform additional rituals of physically segregated demeanor: women covering their heads with scarves, and showing as little flesh as possible was a long time Catholic Christian ritual marker; this has declined in the West, but this pattern remains exemplified today in the extensive body coverings for females in Islamic ritual practice. IR theory argues that beliefs about the lower religious status of women are not the cause but the product of these ritual practices.

The Protestant churches, in varying degrees, broke with Catholic worship ritual on just these dimensions. The most Catholic-like, or “high church”, maintained the special ceremonial standing of the priest and the panoply of well-protected sacred objects and the strong ritual boundaries between inside and outside. The most radical “low church” or “evangelical” Protestants eliminated most of the ritual distinctions between religious elite and ordinary members, and between sacred places and times and the rest of everyday life. The more de-formalized Protestant minister or pastor wears ordinary clothes; altars, chancels and naves divided by screens and communion railings are absent; and the preacher may be physically distinguished by nothing more



than a podium or a microphone. The central sacred object of the traditional Catholic church is the crucifix, the image of the supreme moment of Christian history; today's Protestant churches may not have even a cross. Instead the foremost sacred object visible in a Protestant service is the Bible, usually in the pulpit or the preacher's hand; in churches with intense participation, most of the congregation carry their own Bibles. For the traditional Catholic Church, the Bible was largely the implement of the clergy, where it was more or less equal in standing with the most honored theological writings and papal directives; more broadly, the written word was less central in actual practice than the ceremonial. The Protestant revolution in religious practice above all put the Bible at the center; first during collective worship; but also, since members were encouraged to carry their own Bibles, read them privately, and use them to guide their prayers, rituals of everyday life were strongly connected with collective rituals.

The iconoclasm of the early radical Protestants-- getting rid of church icons, treasures, holy relics, beautiful art and grand architecture, sometimes by wrecking them, but more often by building a much plainer form of worship-- should be seen not so much as an attack on idolatry or luxury, but as a radical shift among two different ways rituals organized social relationships. The proliferation of sacred objects in Catholic worship, and the resulting differentiation in religious rank enacted by differential access to various sacred objects, was replaced by the tendency towards leveling and egalitarianism in Protestant congregations. This latter also went along with lowering boundaries between worship and everyday life; and with a shift towards verbal precepts that good Protestant Christians were constantly reading and repeating to themselves and others, thereby putting considerable pressure on themselves to act a religious life in their ordinary affairs.

This does not necessarily mean that Protestants are more ethical people than Catholics, or that they have greater altruism and sympathy for others; many historical contemporaries of the early centuries of Protestantism thought they were moralistic and doctrinaire, but cruel and hypocritical in their actions. Weber commented that Protestantism gave its followers a clear conscience in exploiting their workers and ignoring the plight of the poor. In contrast, Catholicism made auxiliary rituals out of giving alms and aiding the poor, sick, and unfortunate, which were among the rituals that Protestant radicals swept away. The thrust of my argument is that the different organization of ritual practice among Catholics and Protestants brought about quite different patterns of life-conduct or Weberian "ethic."

Contra Weber [1904-5/1995] and many other interpreters, I argue that theological doctrines are not the driving force for these different practical ethics. Doctrines such as predestination do not automatically prescribe any particular kind of ritualism, nor of life conduct; any simple dichotomy between Protestants who believed in predestination and Catholics who did not ignores the long history of complicated positions in Catholicism on the issue, and the variations among the Protestants themselves. Calvin himself did not hold a consistent doctrine, and he emphasized original sin most strongly when polemicizing against Anabaptists-- i.e. combating a rival sect whose key identity was the ritual of adult baptism. [Walzer 1965; chapter 2] This practice made individuals decide for themselves if they were to be “born again”, thereby undercutting the traditional priestly monopoly over baptism carried out on infants. Salvation by predestination was thus a doctrinal solution to questions raised by the revolt against the ritual centrality of priests: if one could not find salvation by priestly rituals (which included not just baptism but a life-long series of sacraments), nor by one’s own decision, the answer could be left mysterious, in the inscrutable will of God. This negative doctrine implied nothing for life conduct; if Protestants were more methodical, disciplined, harsh on themselves and others, etc. the differences can be more easily traced to the shift in ritual permeation of everyday life and politics (for somewhat bloodcurdling examples, see Gorski [2003] on strict Protestant regimes in Holland and Prussia).

What about the emotional ingredient in Catholic and Protestant rituals? Protestants, at their most extreme, were known for their emotion-stirring preachers. What Americans called “old time religion” meant the traveling revival preachers with their camp meetings, preaching vivid pictures of the tortures of hell and damnation, exhorting individuals to come forward before the assembly and repent and be received into committed membership. The religious practice determines the doctrine; revivalist or conversion movements need strong emotions, and hence favor doctrines such as damnation which build up fear at the same time the practice of public conversation offers an escape from it. This is supported by comparative evidence that when Buddhism went into a proselytizing mode in 13th century Japan, it not only played down previous doctrine (enlightenment through meditation, which applied only to monks, or magical rituals for the court) but played up threats of reincarnation in Hell, while offering rebirth in a heaven-like Pure Land to lay believers who joined the collective enthusiasm [Collins 1998: 328-31]. In Christianity and Buddhism alike, there is a repository of past doctrines which foreshadow all sorts of interpretations; but what is emphasized at any particular time is a result of prevailing ritual practices.

Revival meetings were successful IRs because they alternated the emotion of fear and guilt with joyful emotions of collective worship. Protestant worship specialized in strong states of Durkheimian collective effervescence, combining the loud voices and rhythmic shouts of trained religious orators with a high level of audience participation. Call-and-response carried out at a high level of noise and fervor can lead to full-scale bodily entrainment in shared rhythms; these effervescent peaks could be used for faith healing, and in a less utilitarian vein, for speaking in tongues, for snake-handling and other minor miracles or displays of sacred charisma.

The component of joyful emotion in Protestant worship ritual has been ritually produced by the emphasis on collective singing [for a micro-analysis in terms of interaction ritual: Heider and Warner 2009]. Here too is a sharp historical break from traditional Catholicism, where singing was done solo by the priest at specific moments in the liturgy, while the congregation listened passively; collective singing was done in a choir-- a segregated place in the holy inner zone of the church-- by lower-ranking clergy or semi-sacred assistants such as altar boys. Both Catholic and Protestant worship have used music to create a holy atmosphere, add an element of beauty, and build the rhythmic entrainment that aids high levels of ritual experience. On the whole, Protestants have pushed the musical element much further, making the singing of hymns by the congregation key moments of a worship service. Protestant hymns strongly emphasized the combination of mass musical participation with verbal messages-- in the vernacular language rather than archaic Latin; I suspect that most Protestants (at least of my generation) learned what they knew of church belief mainly from the words of hymns.

Historically, different ranges of emotion have been the characteristic, even the property, of particular denominations. Weber [1922/1991: 80-117] summarized world-comparative patterns by noting that upper class churches prefer dignity and decorum, middle-class churches emphasize moralism, lower-class churches outbursts of emotional fervor (high levels of short-term collective effervescence) which are in turn looked down upon by the higher classes. In the Finke and Stark [1992] model of the life cycle of churches, a growing religion has more fervor, while it settles down to dignified formalism as it becomes institutionalized and static. Emotional ranges also vary historically. If modern Protestant churches began with preaching fear of Hell and the joy of salvation (i.e. in fervent collective assemblies such as the early Methodists), Catholic worship services have been more

dignified, soothing, stressing the exalting feelings of looking upwards-- to priests, to beautiful and inspiring images, to dramatically vaulted ceilings.

I would suggest that the more intense emotions for Catholic laity came above all from rituals marking key transition points of life, and especially death. The ritual of the last rites was emphasized in medieval and early modern society as the key point of one's life. Preachers did not so much collectively terrify an audience with images of Hell-- that was a Protestant specialty, whose denouement was the mass conversion-- but priests made a dramatic appearance when someone was about to die, thereby emphasizing the individual's own hopes and fears of the afterlife. Catholicism may have been less intrusive than Protestantism in controlling everyday life conduct, but it made individuals pay attention to the church at key moments. Paradoxically, I would suggest that Catholicism has been more individual-oriented in its rituals than Protestantism. Where Protestants tend towards doing public rituals in unison, Catholics have more differentiated rituals for specific individuals in specific circumstances. We see this also in the long-standing Catholic emphasis on the monastic life as the highest form of religion, giving elite status to persons who concentrate on ascetic or mystical practices which bring the individual into direct contact with the divine. Thus the emotions undergone by monks and nuns, and by individuals striving to become saints through visions and exemplary asceticism, give a specialized emotional ingredient to traditional Catholic life that disappeared when Protestants abolished monasteries and radically changed the life-practices that qualified one as a saint.

I should mention also the ritual of confession, although it is neither a collective worship ritual nor a private prayer/ meditation ritual. Confession was especially emphasized by the Counter-Reformation (although it is older, but not much carried out until that time); this is a psychologically penetrating ritual between priest and lay member, which scrutinizes individual thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. Confession is not only the precursor to modern psychotherapy, but also constructs a private, Goffmanian backstage behind the front stage of public life. Weber thought that Protestants had much more internal self-reflection and self-control than Catholics; I think this is dubious, but it is a question that can be investigated by micro-sociological methods.

I have sketched some key patterns of religious rituals for a particular period of history. Change goes on. One can argue that the key changes of the past 50 years have been above all in ritual. Late 20th century Catholicism changed in a "Protestant" direction-- incorporating more lay participation in the sacred precincts of worship ceremony, switching to vernacular language to include more of the laity (although annoying some with

the loss of dignity and aesthetics), adding collective hymn-singing, and sometimes rituals borrowed from the touchy-feely group psychology movements of the 1970s and after, where worshipers hug or introduce themselves to strangers in the pews. The success or failure of these interaction rituals (by the criteria I gave at the outset) can be empirically studied.

Protestantism has also been changing, and not merely by the renewed expansion of revival-type born-again mass meetings. The ritual practices and emotional tone of the newer evangelical Protestant churches have changed in several ways. The emphasis on fear and punishment has greatly declined; not only has the prevalence of belief in Hell plummeted in opinion polls, but my observations suggest that preachers rarely focus on depictions of hell and damnation. The popular mass participation churches of recent years place even more emphasis on joyful mass participation, especially through music. An evangelical service usually begins now with ten minutes or so of a band playing the same kinds of tunes as popular music but with religious lyrics, while those of the audience who feel so moved stand and dance rhythmically in place. This is not sexual dancing-- it is not done by couples-- nor group dancing of the kind exemplified by line dancing or by peasant dances; it is an adaptation of individual ecstatic dancing by oneself. Photos suggest that dancers keep their eyes closed, as if in prayer, in communion with an invisible spirit. Musical worship has taken another step from all standing to sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," or "Faith of Our Fathers, Holy Faith." My analysis of the lyrics of songs at evangelical meetings (which in many respects resemble pop concerts), suggests that the verbal content is a joyful, yearning emotion, patterned on a love affair between the worshiper and Jesus. Contemporary rituals project secular patterns onto the divine; it is a pattern seen in past history of world religions as well.

#### *Individual Religious Ritual: Prayer and Meditation*

Prayer can happen publicly and out loud; here I will comment briefly on silent, internal prayer. Empirically, we are just now learning about some of the things that people do when they pray, as well as how frequently they pray, for what purposes, and in what forms. (For overviews of recent research, see Bender 2008; Cadge and Daglian 2008; Cerulo and Barra 2008; Wuthnow 2008; and other papers in the special issue of *Poetics*, volume 36, issues 5-6, 2008.)

Micro-sociologically, prayer is a type of internal dialogue. More generically, internal dialogue is a crucial human activity. G. H. Mead's [1934] symbolic interactionism holds that the division of the self into an active I, a self-image Me, and an internalized observer and interlocutor Generalized Other, makes it possible for persons to take the role of the other and thus to work out imaginatively and sympathetically one's interactions with other people. Interplay between these three parts of the self also allows internal dialogue, what we experience as verbal thinking. A child learns to think first by speaking with others, then gradually by speaking to imaginary others, and finally playing all the parts internally as subvocal thought. Wiley [1994], Archer [2003] and others have begun to gather data on the processes and social distribution of different kinds of internal dialogue. My own analysis [Collins 2004: chapter 5] is that much internal dialogue is connected to external conversations that have recently taken place, or that one expects to happen in upcoming encounters. Thought is heavily social, because it is embedded in chains of social interaction which it repeats or rehearses. Sometimes internal dialogue adds meta-loops of commentary on itself, whether steering the self beyond previous experience, or being caught up in obsessive or traumatic repetitions. As I will describe further in analyzing meditation, internal dialogue is carried along by the same kinds of emotional intensities as external interaction rituals; idea-symbols which are strongly marked by socially-experienced emotion are not only easier to remember [Damasio 1994] but jump into consciousness in the internal dialogue.

Prayer as a form of internal dialogue has a distinctive structure, although its contents may be similar to other kind of thinking and talking. One speaks to God, or some other divine person-- Jesus, or perhaps an intercessor such as Mary or a saint who is asked to carry the message further. In contrast, most internal dialogue is speaking to oneself, playing various roles in order to keep the thought-process going, or sometimes imagining particular human encounters which one is rehearsing. The interlocutor of prayer is an ideal person, not some one in everyday life, and this interlocutor is regarded as having very great powers, far beyond the usual role-taking of internal dialogue. Prayer is asking for help, praising, or thanking-- acts not usually found in mundane internal dialogue.

We know relatively little about the social causes and consequences of prayer (other than some research on health). Specifically, what are the religious correlates of prayer? Prayers are of different kinds: praying for particular goals (for health, fortune, victory); for psychological states (fortitude, courage, etc.); for guidance in making a decision; praying for oneself or for others; and for objective conditions (world peace, etc.).

Sociologically we would like to know: what happens before and after various kinds of praying? i.e. what is the location of prayers in longer interaction ritual chains? Since internal dialogue generally is tied to external dialogue, a hypothesis is that the frequency of collective prayer influences the frequency of internal prayer.

Among the consequences of prayer, I suggest is the strength of religious belief.

From a micro-sociological viewpoint, what is belief? Doctrinal belief is verbal-- words that one speaks, hears or reads, above all words one says in the interior dialogue of thought. Since it is possible to say something without believing it, belief is speaking words with a particular kind of emotion, and in a particular sequence-- there is no "mental reservation", no internal meta-commentary which denies the words. In this sense, belief is not constant; it is enacted, moment by moment, when one has these verbal experiences; when one no longer has them, one no longer believes. Belief has to be practiced, not so much in the sense of behavior but crucially in verbal practice. My hypothesis is that prayer sustains and enacts belief-- at least prayer which has a particular kind of verbal form. Luther famously advised a monk who complained of losing his faith, to keep praying-- the faith will come. To say, I believe in God, has meaning above all if I pray to him; the very speech-act of praying points to a listener. Empirically, we would like to know more about the details of experiences of having a prayer answered, especially in the prayer dialogue itself.

In mysticism, the meditator does not use verbal means of this sort. Hence the divine does not appear as person-like, as an interlocutor who hears or speaks in words, but as a transcendently powerful presence which may be approached, but not asked to intercede in any specific way. The self is already somewhat effaced in this absence of specific requests. The approach may be nearer or more distant, and different emotions happen at different distances (or perhaps, constitute the feeling of these distances). The highest experience, meditators agree, is the loss of the individual self-- not only silencing interior dialogue, but extirpating the form of one's individual body, and merging with the divine. This is archetypally experienced as without shape or form, but generally has the quality either of bright light or intensely palpable darkness. Some kinds of meditation (especially in Buddhist practices, and those carried out with the eyes open) are described as like seeing everything through a sheet of glass, with the focus on the glass rather than on what is seen through it. [For a summary and references to the vast literature on meditation, see Collins 1998: 204-224, 290-298, 332-347, 964-965]

There are verbal forms of meditation, such as Zen *koans*-- paradoxical or multi-level sayings which are intensely thought about, with an aim towards achieving a moment of breakthrough. This combines a sense of solving the riddle, an emotional release, sometimes with bodily sensations and visual experiences similar to the apex of wordless meditation. But since *koan* meditation is also an organized discipline in a monastic hierarchy, enlightenment is announced and attested by verbal means, such as writing an enlightenment poem or koan of one's own which is recognized by previous masters. Chinese and Japanese monks received enlightenment certificates, which entitled them to become heads of monasteries in their own right. The social part of meditation appears to be inescapable, even in the most sophisticated religious practices aimed at transcending ordinary reality and the ordinary social world.

Wiley [1994] theorizes that since thought is interior dialogue, it is possible to carry out interaction rituals with oneself. Internal IRs can succeed or fail; one can achieve a high degree of focus on topic and speech acts, build up a rhythm, and thereby intensity one's emotions into an internal version of collective effervescence. I have referred to this as self-entrainment (which can be compared to Csikszentmihalyi's [1997] concept of flow). In the other direction, one's thoughts can be scattered, self-interrupting, self-critical, or in other ways unfocused, allowing no feeling of unity of self; at the extreme, Wiley argues, these are the experience of mental illnesses. Successful meditation is the high point of self-integration, carrying out an intense Durkheimian ritual but inside the self rather than in an external social assembly. Since the self is made of parts-- in the symbolic interactionist theory, I, Me, Generalized Other (and perhaps other components, such as particularized others, listed by Wiley 1994), it is possible to carry out IRs internally among these parts of the self; when successful, internal IRs produce an internal version of collective effervescence, self-solidarity, and emotional energy. The most successful experiences of religious meditation, by my hypothesis, are a very high degree of self-entrainment; hence the serenity, the ease and grace which "enlightened" meditators acquire. This gives them a quiet charisma that propagates to their followers, and makes them the center of more social rituals which unite organizations of monks.

There has been a good deal of laboratory research on the psychology of meditation, and especially on its brain physiology (Kabat-Zinn 1990). Such research generally has been concerned with secular uses of meditation for health, rather than the religious experience of meditation. Micro-sociology, as an ethnography of real-life situations and their social dimensions, still has much to do in analyzing what people do in meditation.



From the point of view of IR theory, we need more detailed description of the sequence of emotions experienced by meditators, since it is emotional transformation which is a key to successful rituals. A crucial comparison is how meditation succeeds or fails. During earlier stages of meditation, there are feelings of effort, frustration, tension, and boredom; concentration is easily lost, internal dialogue intrudes, thought wanders; the body takes part in the struggle by introducing persistent itches and other sensations; tranquility may be achieved, but with the danger of falling into lethargy and sleep. One interpretation of sudden enlightenment experiences is that these come from building up a high degree of tension between the goal of meditation and these various obstacles; it is the moment of breaking through these obstacles that produces the flash, and the powerful emotion of harmony after a rough passage. What are the emotional components of this experience could be examined further by micro-sociologists, especially as they happen as a sequence in time.

I have suggested that internal rituals can produce self-solidarity and emotional energy. Do they also produce an internal counterpart of sacred objects, which in external Durkheimian rituals are the collective symbols which represent membership for the group? But how can internal sacred objects, not communicated to others, have this kind of meaning? Social symbols are also the frames through which we think, and how we designate objects in the world. For the collective religious ritual, the sacred object is an emblem for God. Is this so also in the internal ritual of meditation, especially at the endpoint which transcends words and conventional objects? Although the experience is private, meditators when they come out of these experiences do refer to them as God, nirvana, or some other designator of its transcendently sacred quality, even though they usually stress the inadequacy of words for this reality.

Does this make the highest religious experience solipsistic, merely an internal psychological state? The point has been disputed in the philosophical traditions of various religions, notably in Hinduism, and in Confucian criticism of Buddhism; [Collins 1998: 241-252, 262-266, 274-81]. Without resolving this here, we can note that religions that center on meditation have held that the path to God is through the self, and that recognizing the spiritual unity of the self with its larger, cosmic analogue is the highest religious experience. IR theory adds: it is the harmoniously unified self, the smoothly entrained self, that is thus cosmically transcendent.

But why is the highest experience of meditation wordless, transcending internal dialogue which is constitutive of human subjectivity, of the human self? Preston [1988], who has studied Buddhist meditation through participant observation sensitized by ethnomethodology, concludes that Zen practice focuses on the

insight that words, although necessary for practical life, nevertheless shape our world-views into rigid and ultimately distorting forms; Buddhist meditation techniques take apart this belief in verbally-framed reality, and focus on the constructedness, the process of reality-construction itself. Meditative enlightenment brings one into realization of the reality-constructor; starting with words (since that is how we communicate, even in a Buddhist movement) we move onward to getting beyond words, and finally concentrating on our capacity for reality-construction rather than on what is constructed in it. This resembles the image of the clear glass window mentioned above.

In this sketch, I have omitted Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and other forms of mysticism [see Collins 1998: 405-7, 423-8, 451-5, 494-497 and references given]. These practices are sometimes more closely related to verbal prayer, to self-examination (e.g. St. Teresa of Avila's concern whether her visions are from God or the devil); or may use visualization of internal images as focal points for concentration, sometimes resulting in the experience of emotions in various parts of the body (these last are key ingredients of tantrism in India and elsewhere). The range of mystical practices is a big field for micro-sociological analysis (for an empirical example, see Summers-Effler 2010).

### *Conclusion*

Micro-sociology cannot claim to have arrived at an ultimate understanding of religious realities. But it can say interesting things about them; it can move us forward. Micro-sociology provides a technique for examining every aspect of religion, not just its outer and superficial aspects; not just what people say but what they actually do and experience. And it provides theoretical models which guide us in what to look for, and offer possible explanations of even the highest aspects of religious life. As further micro-sociologists join in this collective research project, we can expect deeper understandings.

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