



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

Review and Criticism of Thomas Luckmann's Theory of Invisible Religion

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Abstract

This study examines the place of religion in modern societies and explains the mechanisms of its transformation by drawing on Husserl's phenomenological thought alongside a reinterpretation of Thomas Luckmann's sociological approach. It shows how Alfred Schutz introduced concepts such as the lifeworld, intersubjectivity, the constitution of consciousness, and mental representation into the sociology of religion, and how these concepts later became foundational to Luckmann's analysis of "invisible religion." Methodologically, the research relies on documentary analysis, theoretical critique, and conceptual analysis to explore the relationship between social structures and new forms of religious meaning-making. The findings indicate that religion in the modern era has neither disappeared nor remains exclusively identifiable through traditional institutions; rather, at an individual and privatized level, it continues to provide meaning. The study further argues that many criticisms of Luckmann's theory of "privatization" stem from inattention to its conceptual foundations or from hasty generalizations. Ultimately, the research contends that careful attention to social and historical contexts enables the prediction of patterns of religious transformation across different societies. The contribution of this study lies in its critical re-reading of Luckmann's approach and in highlighting its utility for understanding religion in the modern age.

Keywords: Lifeworld; Intersubjectivity; Invisible Religion; Social Construction of Reality; Phenomenology; Meaning-Making; Modernity.

Background and Context of the Study

Structural transformations associated with modernity have made religion less readily identifiable solely within the framework of traditional institutions. In recent decades, the sociology of religion has confronted foundational questions: Does modernity lead to the decline of religion? Is secularization a universal principle? And if religion is being transformed, what are its new forms? In this context, Husserl's phenomenology, by introducing concepts such as the lifeworld and intersubjectivity, emphasizes that religious consciousness and experience are formed within a matrix of social and cultural meanings. Schutz brought these concepts to bear on the understanding of everyday reality, and Luckmann, by developing them in the realm of religion, proposed the concept of "invisible religion," also described as "privatization."

At the same time, the literature in the sociology of religion highlights two dominant approaches: one that reduces religion to the institution of the church, and another that neglects its private functions. Addressing an important research gap, the present study underscores the necessity of understanding religion at the level of individual, symbolic, and market-oriented experiences. A review of criticisms shows that opponents of privatization theory tend to emphasize substantial definitions of religion and pay comparatively less attention to its meaning-making function in everyday life. In this light, the present study argues that understanding religion in the modern era requires an interpretive, phenomenological approach that moves beyond classical institutionalism.

Objectives and Research Questions

Objectives

- To explain the phenomenological foundations of the theory of invisible religion.
- To examine the role of the lifeworld and intersubjectivity in religious meaning-making.
- To analyze the relationship between social structure and various forms of religiosity.

Research Questions

- How is religion defined in Luckmann's thought, and how does this differ from substantial definitions?
- What effects does modernity have on forms of religiosity?

- What alternatives to religiosity exist in the modern age, and how do they create meaning?
- On what grounds are criticisms of the privatization of religion based?

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The theoretical basis of this research is rooted in Husserlian phenomenology. Intentionality, namely, that consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” shows that religious experience is formed within mental representation. Husserl’s concept of “constitution” explains how phenomena acquire meaning within consciousness and thereby grounds the concept of the “lifeworld,” a pre-given world upon which experience is based. Building on these concepts, Schutz distinguished between different domains of meaning and, through the notion of intersubjectivity, showed that understanding the “other” is an interactive and symbolic process. Developing these ideas further, Luckmann conceptualizes religion as a meaning system linking mental experiences to social realities. Methodologically, this study employs documentary analysis, theoretical critique, and historical comparison to analyze the transformation of religion in relation to social structures. Reliance on classical sources and contemporary critiques enables a sustained discourse on invisible religion.

Findings

- **Transformation rather than decline:** In modern societies, religion has distanced itself from public institutions yet remains present at an individual, meaning-giving level. This transformation is related to increasing social complexity.
- **Invisible religion:** In this model, the individual becomes central, and personal experiences acquire sacred significance. Elements such as autonomy, self-actualization, and familism form a new semantic structure.
- **Market of meaning:** Religious content is offered under conditions of supply and demand and is shaped by competition. No single official institution exclusively provides religion.
- **Critique of institutionalism:** Luckmann helps to free the sociology of religion from an excessive focus on the church, directing attention to individuals’ lifeworlds.
- **Limits of criticisms:** Many critiques overlook Luckmann’s theoretical foundations and rely on hasty generalizations.

- **Predictability of change:** Analyzing social context enables the modeling of future forms of religiosity.

Discussion and Significance

The results show that modernity has transformed religion rather than eliminated it. The distinction between institution-centered and experiential religion provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding meaning-making in everyday life. The significance of Luckmann's theory lies in its phenomenological account of religious experience, which reveals a generative relationship between symbolic systems and social structures. The principal limitation of the theory is the ambiguity in distinguishing religion from other meaning systems, an issue emphasized by critics. Even so, the focus on individual centrality and the semantic flexibility of religion makes this approach especially useful for analyzing pluralistic and post-secular societies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Luckmann's theory of invisible religion offers an important tool for understanding emerging forms of religiosity in modern societies. Although religion has shifted from the public sphere to the private realm, it continues to fulfill a meaning-making function. The centrality of the individual, the plurality of symbols, and the market of meaning constitute the principal elements of this transformation. A review of critiques suggests that understanding religion today requires moving beyond institutionalism to attend to lived experience. Future research should develop predictive models of religious transformation based on systematic analyses of social structures.

Dissertation Information

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