SECSOR 2020

**Date:** February 28—March 1, 2020

**Location:** The University of Georgia, Athens, GA

**Theme:** Rapid Religious Cultural Change

**Central Question:** Why do religious beliefs at times change very quickly and what kinds of societal impacts do these changes have?

For the purpose of this meeting, rapid religious cultural change will be defined as a religious change that drives sudden cultural innovations throughout society. To date, social scientists and theologians have primarily focused on the coherence and continuity of religion and culture, even during periods of apparent rapid change. This continuity thinking derives from the fact that human beings value order and predictability in the world and, thus, actively work to reproduce their cultural understandings and social arrangements. According to Durkheim’s classical social theory, any behavior that is not in keeping with what is culturally expected is branded as deviant and those who enact such behavior are punished. Also, the very sophisticated and influential late Twentieth Century theoretical work of Marshall Sahlins (1985) claimed people are led to reproduce their cultures and social lives along traditional lines even going so far as to say that people often fail to perceive new elements of their worlds as new. Instead, they work hard to see new elements as simply versions of phenomena they have encountered before.

Social scientific theories of cultural coherence and continuity have been generative. These include cultural evolution (E.B. Tyler), acculturation (A.L. Kroeber), diffusion (Franz Boas and Louis Henry Morgan), cultural ecology (Julian Steward), functionalism (Bronislaw Malinowski), structural functionalism (Radcliffe-Brown and Emile Durkheim), and world-system theory (Immanuel Wallerstein). However, they have been limiting as well. Specifically, they have drawn scholars’ attention away from studying religion’s rapid changes. For example, the well-established subfield of the anthropology of Christianity, which emerged in the late 1990s, found that recently converted and frequently Pentecostal Christians were insistent in proclaiming that their lives changed radically when they became Christian. Many of these Christians also were confident that their lives will again change radically at the time of the second coming – an event some expected was imminent - or when they find heaven or hell after their own individual deaths. In a specific example, anthropologist Joel Robbins’ (2004) ethnography of the Urampin showed that upon conversion to Christianity, the Urampin immediately ended their indigenous religion. Confronted during their fieldwork with people for whom beginnings and endings were so important, Robbins and other anthropologists of Christianity began to promote rapid religious change as an anthropological theme and to theorize the processes by which changes come about (Robbins 2017, Chua 2012; Engelke 2004; Lampe 2010). The need to investigate rapid religious cultural change continues because neglecting rupture fails to account for the ability of humans to make rapid, intentional, religious cultural changes marked by endings and beginnings (Wason 2017).

Social scientists have been baffled by recent rapid religious changes around the world that have supported sweeping political shifts opposing neoliberal ideals (Lurhmann 2016; Mahmood 2015; Stein 2016). Furthermore, social scientists have a lot of work to do to develop a theoretically well-rounded understanding of the ways new beginnings and abrupt endings come about in the midst of social life, as well as on the sub-question of how religion often drives these processes. For their part, theologians have been challenged by Rod Dreher’s (2017) book The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation, which discusses the ending of Christian culture in the West due to events like the sexual revolution. These events are transmitted with increasing rapidity through social media and other technologies associated with globalization, and many faith communities are struggling to adapt. In fact, theology, all too frequently, finds itself in reactive mode: responding to changes it did not anticipate and representing faith traditions that are mired in their own resistance to change. While theology highly values tradition, Christian theology, as one example, also thinks about the life, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as events without parallel in history. Christian theology views these events as setting in motion radical changes in the lives and sometimes the societies of those who come to believe in the Christian proclamation. For example, the Twentieth Century tradition of German thinking that grew out of dialectical theology provides one promising resource.  Major theologians like Barth, Moltmann and Jüngel made the themes of disruption, interruption, promise and hope key to contemporary debates. Also, Niebuhr’s ground-breaking work on culture still serves as a landmark study. Likewise, Christian eschatological thought is filled with rich considerations of the nature not only of change itself, but also of related phenomena like hope and expectation that are also central to processes of change. This example from Christianity illustrates that theology possesses important resources for thinking about radical changes and the new beginnings and abrupt endings that bring them about.

By exploring religious cultural change theory, social scientists and theologians can take a step toward expanding the understanding of divinity and encouraging spiritual innovation around the world. Specifically, this meeting will provide an opportunity for scholars of diverse religious traditions to generate research about spiritual innovation by seeking to understand the process of how theology influences humans to make rapid religious cultural change.

**References**

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