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RESEARCH

The Sociological Study of Science and Religion and the *Invisible Religion*: Conditions of Possibility for the 'Conflict Thesis'

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Abstract

This article explores the persistence of the "conflict thesis"—the belief that science and religion are fundamentally incompatible—through a sociological lens grounded in Thomas Luckmann's concept of "invisible religion". The text examines how dominant narratives of conflict typically reflect assumptions rooted in a specific social form: church-oriented religion. By analyzing historical and contemporary discourses, including those of New Atheism and creationist movements, the article details how both secular and religious arguments often rely on institutionalized models of religion. In contrast, Luckmann's framework highlights the rise of individualized, privatized religiosity, which operates outside traditional institutional boundaries and seldom gives rise to epistemic conflict. Drawing on qualitative research and case studies, the text demonstrates that individualized religious expressions are often eclectic, biographically shaped, and largely compatible with scientific worldviews. This shift in perspective challenges the explanatory power of the conflict thesis by illustrating that perceived incompatibility is not intrinsic to religion per se but to specific social forms. The article ultimately argues for a broader sociological approach that accounts for the diversity of religious expressions when analyzing the relationship between science and religion.

Keywords Sociology of religion · Conflict thesis · Science and religion · Secularization · Individualized religion · Thomas luckmann

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Introduction

Despite ample historical and sociological evidence to the contrary, the belief that science and religion are in perpetual conflict persists in the public consciousness of many (Western) societies as well as in the form of media tropes and, occasionally, in scholarly debates as well. Summarizing findings from a multidisciplinary treatment of why this is the case, Mark Noll and David Livingstone (2018) present several reasons for this: the idea serves certain ideological and rhetorical purposes, as seen in historical examples where figures like Arthur Keith and Thomas Huxley used it to provoke controversy and challenge religious authority. Second, public intellectuals and some scientists continue to embrace the conflict model, often dismissing those with religious affiliations as incapable of engaging with science in an objective manner. Third, contemporary culture wars contribute to the endurance of this notion. Concerns about religious fundamentalism, the influence of Intelligent Design, and the integrity of science curricula fuel anxieties that reinforce the perception of a battle between science and faith. Additionally, historical and cultural contexts shape the reception of scientific ideas, with resistance to evolution in different regions often rooted in broader social or political struggles rather than purely religious opposition.

Oft-cited historical examples confirm similar patterns. One of the earliest examples of the public dissemination of the conflict thesis stems from historian Andrew Dickson White, who argued in his 1869 lecture "The Battle-Fields of Science" that science and religion were in a state of perpetual warfare, a claim he later expanded into his 1896 two-volume work *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (White, 1896). White's arguments were shaped by personal experiences, particularly the opposition he faced from religiously affiliated colleges while establishing Cornell University as a nonsectarian institution. He framed this opposition as evidence of a broader historical conflict between religion and scientific progress. To support his thesis, White selectively used historical examples, often misrepresenting them to fit his narrative. He depicted clergy as opponents of scientific advancement, citing cases such as religious resistance to Copernican astronomy and medical developments. However, modern historians have criticized his approach, noting that he cherry-picked events and even distorted sources—for example, truncating a quote from St. Augustine to alter its meaning and using Washington Irving's fictionalized account of Columbus as historical evidence. Despite these methodological flaws, White's warfare model has persisted in public discourse, reinforcing the perception of an inherent conflict between science and religion (Principe, 2018).

More than 100 years later, the New Atheists also largely assumed that science and religion are in conflict, often without making an explicit historical case for this view. Dawkins (2008: 54–60), for example, describes religious faith as a harmful delusion and rejects any claims of convergence between science and religion as dishonest spin. Harris (2004: 165–168) argues that the conflict between the two is inherent and nearly zero-sum, as religious dogma often undermines science. Coyne (2015: 102–147) and Myers (2013: 159ff.) take an even stronger stance, dismissing historians who challenge the conflict thesis as "accommodationists" and insisting that science and religion are fundamentally incompatible, with science continuously replacing religious explanations. Hitchens (2007: 64–70), while less scientifically focused,

reinforces the idea of religion as an enemy of knowledge, citing historical claims (often undocumented) about religion's suppression of science. Stenger (2008: 73ff.), one of the few New Atheists to engage with historical narratives, acknowledges that the conflict thesis may be an oversimplification but ultimately argues that Christianity has historically been more of a hindrance than a help to scientific progress. (Numbers & Hardin, 2018: 220–238).

Of course, conflict positions on science–religion interaction are by no means articulated only from the secular side. A prominent example of a religious conflict position is creationism, which comes in a number of variants that differ, among other things, in the scope and rigorousness with which they reject parts of modern scientific knowledge, most of all secular theories of the development of life and theories that presuppose a very old universe and/or planet Earth (Numbers, 2006: 7–12 et passim; Kaden, 2019: 9–46). For instance, young-earth creationists like John Whitcomb and Henry Morris (1961) argued, based on a literal reading of Genesis, that many geological features that usually are seen as evidence for an old earth were in fact the result of the Genesis flood. More recently, proponents of Intelligent Design like Meyer (2009) made the case for the intervention of an Intelligent Designer in the human cell. These and other creationist accounts are at odds with the respective secular scientific stocks of knowledge, and consequently have garnered significant backlash, leading to vocal public disputes over their veracity and their integration into public school or university curricula (Scott, 2008: 77–164).

The conflict thesis is but one among a variety of positions and qualifications that characterize the relationship between science and religion. Barbour (2000: 7–38) famously but not uncriticized (e.g., Cantor & Kenny, 2001) identified conflict, independence, dialogue and integration as the four main modes of science–religion interaction. Recent years have seen significant conceptual and empirical broadening of social scientific research vistas (compare Ecklund et al., 2019; Catto et al., 2019), thus adding more arguments against the validity of the conflict thesis from the vantage points of non-Abrahamic religions and religious as well as scientific laypeople (Jones et al., 2019).

Beyond the conflict thesis, scholars have also emphasized conciliatory positions. Harrison (2015: 83–116) has argued that the Reformation's emphasis on literal interpretation of scripture shaped a broader epistemic culture that encouraged direct engagement with both sacred texts and the natural world, thereby fostering the rise of modern science. Roberts (1988) similarly shows that many nineteenth-century American Protestants sought to reconcile evolutionary theory with Christian theology, insisting since the last quarter of the 19th century "not simply a description of natural history but a paradigm for the way in which God operated through His creation". (1988: xi.) Other empirical research has highlighted that perceptions of conflict are contingent upon cultural and institutional conditions rather than inevitable oppositions of worldview (Evans, 2018; Baker, 2013).

The increasing disintegration of (parts of) the public perception of science–religion relationships and the directions of scholarly investigations has led to renewed efforts to understand the reasons for the divide (Evans, 2018; Jones, 2025). This study contributes to this debate by introducing a metaperspective which is based on Thomas Luckmann's (2022 [1967]) observations about the nature of religion, his dif-

ferentiation between a basic form of religion and variable social forms, and applying his thinking to ongoing debates about science and religion. Applying Luckmann's perspective, this article attempts to provide an answer to the questions why and under what conditions religion can function the way it does in conflict narratives; what other conditions for religion–science interaction exist on the religion side; and what follows from this variability for scholarly debates about the relationship between science and religion in general. Key to this endeavor is his differentiation between an anthropological (basic) form of religion and historically variable social forms of religion, which is presented in the following section. Applying an extremely wide definition of religion, Luckmann argues that it is indeed indispensable for human beings in order to become members of any society and, in a concurrent process, become individuals (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 23–29). The social form this kind of religion takes is historically variable, with church-oriented religion being merely one among a number Luckmann identifies, and different social forms may coexist in any given society. The third section deals with church-oriented religion and its features. This discussion will make clear that many diagnoses of conflict are less between religion in general, but between this particular social form and science. Its thematic and social features make it prone to being involved in epistemic conflict, and this elective affinity has repercussions in social scientific research and public debates on the conflict thesis, which will be addressed in this section as well. The fourth section is concerned with the main contemporary alternative social form of religion, which Luckmann identified as religious individualism. Against this backdrop, we can address the question under what conceptual and social conditions the conflict thesis is a comprehensible interpretation of science–religion interaction, and how its alternatives are rooted in an alternative view of the social form(s) of religion.

Anthropological and Social Forms of Religion

Luckmann's Perspective

According to Luckmann (2022 [1967]), the anthropological condition of religion is rooted in the fundamental human need to construct meaning beyond the immediate realities of everyday life. He argues that human consciousness inherently transcends biological necessities, prompting individuals to seek a framework that provides coherence to their experiences. This transcendence, Luckmann suggests, is a defining feature of the human condition, making religion an anthropological constant rather than a historical contingency (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 26–27). Religion, in this sense, emerges from the human quest for ultimate meaning, offering a symbolic universe that situates human existence within a broader, often sacred, context.

Luckmann emphasizes that the anthropological condition of religion is closely linked to the human capacity for self-reflection and abstraction. Unlike animals, humans are not solely bound by instinctual drives; instead, they possess the ability to reflect on their existence, mortality, and purpose. This reflective capacity leads to the construction of symbolic systems that address existential questions and provide a sense of order and stability. For Luckmann, religion is one such symbolic system

that fulfills this anthropological need, serving as a bridge between the finite human experience and the infinite or transcendent realm (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 25).

When it comes to the actual social expression of this anthropological basic form of religion, Luckmann insists that it may take one or more of several different social forms. He defines as a worldview one such universal social form of religion. To him, a world view is a fundamental framework through which individuals and societies interpret reality (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 31). It consists of deeply held beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape perceptions of existence, morality, human nature, and the cosmos. A worldview provides meaning, coherence, and orientation by organizing ideas about life and offering a lens through which people understand their place in the world. Worldviews can be either religious or secular, with religious worldviews being shaped by sacred narratives, doctrines, and traditions, while secular worldviews may be based on philosophical, scientific, or ideological foundations. Furthermore, worldviews influence not only personal perspectives but also cultural, social, and institutional structures, affecting how communities form, how ethical norms develop, and how knowledge is interpreted and transmitted (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 31–35). By shaping an individual's or society's response to fundamental existential questions, a worldview serves as a guiding system that informs behavior, decision-making, and collective identity.

While a worldview in this sense is unspecific, Luckmann also identifies more concrete social forms of religion, which are more in line with conventional thinking about religion. To him, a sacred cosmos is a way of perceiving reality in which the universe is imbued with divine meaning, order, and purpose. It represents a worldview in which the natural and supernatural realms are interconnected, and existence itself is understood as part of a sacred structure. It "forms part of the objective social reality without requiring a distinct and specialized institutional basis" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 60). In such a perspective, the world is not seen as a random or purely material phenomenon but as a manifestation of higher, transcendent principles. Religious traditions often shape the sacred cosmos by providing narratives, rituals, and doctrines that define the relationship between humans, the divine, and the universe. This framework gives meaning to life, establishes moral and ethical guidelines, and structures social institutions in alignment with spiritual principles. By embedding human experience within a larger, divinely ordained reality, the sacred cosmos offers individuals and societies a sense of purpose, continuity, and order, reinforcing their connection to the spiritual dimension of existence. It "determines directly the entire socialization of the individual and is relevant for the total individual biography. To put it differently, religious representations serve to legitimate conduct in the full range of social situations" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 60).

Reverberations in Discourse

These general conceptual remarks by Luckmann can serve as a backdrop to assessing conflict positions in the science-religion debates. In many cases, these pit science as a general denominator, particular scientific disciplines or aspects, or the social function and consequences of science against a particular social form of religion. This is clearly the case when creationists, from a specific (Evangelical) Christian perspective

argue against the validity of the theory of evolution or geological uniformitarianism. Conversely, Luckmann's concept enables us to interpret the basis of strong conflict positions that are argued from a secular point of view with reference to its religious function (in Luckmann's very general sense) as well. Using the concept of worldview as a common denominator, the intellectual backdrop of anti-religious science-oriented voices in the conflict discourse appears as rooted in scientism: a concept which regards science as "the paramount principle of any thinking and action," which should be applied to all areas of life and society, and which is "directed against any religion, particularly against Christian beliefs, which scientism hopes to abolish and supersede" (Kaden & Schmidt-Lux, 2016). If scientism clearly functions the way Luckmann described a worldview, the same is true regarding the complementary ideology that underlies many conflict positions on the religious side. This underlying fundamentalist worldview serves, among other things, to reduce complexity through the creation and application of binary classifications where the positive side contains the proponents themselves and maybe a few others, and the negative side serves as a gigantic residual category that captures a wealth of opposing positions and reduces them to a single entity (Kaden, 2014).

These general observations support the idea that there is something to be said in favor of Luckmann's more general perspective when it comes to explaining why certain discourse positions exist at all. Beginning as early as White's abovementioned account of conflict between science and religion throughout church history, and appearing as recently as in the accounts of the New Atheism, many epistemological conflict positions are based on the assumption that, in Luckmann's terms, there does not exist a distinction between religion in itself and its currently dominant social form. Rather, one social form is seen as representative of or analogous to *all* religion. Likewise, creationist accounts of the antireligious character of (parts of) modern secular science are rooted in the explicit or (in the case of Intelligent Design) implicit view of one particular social form of religion as the reference point of all religion. These implicit identification processes are integrated in, and indeed appear as the expression of, broader worldviews whose orientation function as explicated by Luckmann adds a facet to the scholarly discussions on the persistence of conflict narratives. This first and most general level of *The Invisible Religion*'s argument, when applied to science-religion conflict positions and discourse, suggests as an answer to the question why "the idea" of science-religion conflict "would not die" (Hardin et al., 2018) not only has to do with media mechanisms, personal idiosyncrasies and institutional power, but on a more fundamental level with the stability and inertia of any human's orientation in their social worlds and personal identity.

The second layer of Luckmann's concept concerns the specific social forms religions can take, and the tasks in the following section are, first, to summarize Luckmann's ideas of social forms and his examination of church-oriented religion as one prominent social form; and second, to investigate in what way this conceptual idea can be applied to explain features of science-religion conflict positions as well as their sociological treatment.

Church-Oriented Religion and its Characteristics

Luckmann's Perspective

For much of the West's cultural history, including the period when scholarly thinking on religion developed, the dominant social form of religion was church-oriented religion. According to Luckmann, it is primarily characterized by its institutional structure and formal organization: "[W]e may view church religiosity as a survival of a traditional social form of religion (that it, institutional specialization) on the periphery of modern industrial societies" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 70). He describes it as a system in which religious belief and practice are maintained, regulated, and transmitted through established churches with well-defined doctrines, rituals, and hierarchies. A key marker is the distinction between clergy and laity, with the former assuming authoritative roles in guiding the spiritual life of the community. The church as an institution thus functions as the central mediator between the individual and the sacred, offering structured religious experiences through liturgies, sacraments, and communal worship (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 70–72, 77).

Luckmann emphasizes that a defining feature of church-oriented religion is its focus on collective participation and adherence to shared doctrines. Membership is formalized through initiation rites such as baptism, and is reinforced through regular worship, religious education, and community life. This form of religion fosters belonging and communal identity, as adherents locate spiritual meaning and moral guidance within the framework provided by the church. The collective dimension, moreover, reinforces the church's social functions: the preservation of cultural traditions, the provision of social services, and the shaping of ethical norms (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 40–43).

Furthermore, Luckmann argues that church-oriented religion operates within a broader social and cultural context, often aligning with societal values and institutions. Historically, it has exercised significant influence in the public sphere, particularly in education, politics, and social welfare. Yet he also acknowledges its vulnerability in the face of modern processes of individualization and secularization (2022 [1967]: 40f.). With the rise of alternative forms of religiosity, the social dominance of the church form diminishes. What appears to many observers as secularization in general is, for Luckmann, more accurately the relative decline of this one social form rather than the disappearance of religion altogether (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 42).

Reverberations in Discourse

When viewed against the backdrop of this description, it becomes clear that many if not most variants of science-religion conflict narratives, be they articulated from a religious or from a secular perspective, are based on or oriented towards a church-oriented religion paradigm. This is already the case in one of the earliest treatises on the matter, which was referred to at the outset of the chapter, Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with* Theology in Christendom (White 1896; emphasis mine).

In New Atheism, this occurs against the backdrop of a naturalistic worldview where religion in general is "explained" (Boyer, 2001) with recourse to its alleged phylogenetic advantages, or as a byproduct of such advantages. Some representatives of New Atheism, in particular Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, extend the reach of this naturalistic outlook to include interpretations of religious dogmas, articles of beliefs, songs, etc. as memes, i.e., as cultural units whose sole purpose is to replicate in host brains, analogous to Dawkins' (Dawkins, 2016) concept of "selfish genes".

Despite this very broad backdrop and its concomitant all-encompassing cultural theory, there exists in the New Atheists' writings a predominance of church-religion related examples when arguing conflict positions. For instance, in *The God Delusion*, examples from Catholicism serve to underpin criticism of "monotheistic chauvinism" (Dawkins, 2008: 32), religious discrimination through state law, the alleged absurdity of Christian dogma such as the doctrine of Trinity, the existence of angels, the Pope's invocation of miracles, detrimental effects of faith for mental health, the manipulation of religion for the benefit of the powerful, the doctrine of original sin, the divisive power of religious creed in multireligious societies, and religious antisemitism.

On the other end of conflict positions, creationists also often identify conflict on the basis of a church-religious framework in Luckmann's sense. Particularly from a Protestant viewpoint, creationism functions as a vehicle to fortify the respective denominations' (e.g., Southern Baptists, Missouri-Synod Lutherans, Pentecostals) belief in the infallibility of Scripture (compare Numbers, 2006). While not churches themselves, creationist organizations mirror church-religious dogmatic and adherence structures through statements of faith, such as the one proclaimed by Answers in Genesis, the most prominent young-earth creationist organization:

> In order to preserve the function and integrity of the Answers in Genesis (AiG) ministry […] in its mission to proclaim the absolute truth and authority of Scripture and to provide a biblical role model to our employees and to the global body of Christ, the community, and society at large, it is imperative that all persons employed by the AiG ministry in any capacity, or who serve as volunteers, should abide by and agree to our Statement of Faith and conduct themselves accordingly. (Answers in Genesis, 2021)

After this introductory section, the organization proceeds to list nearly 50 items of faith, referenced with respective Bible passages covering topics such as *The Triune God*, *Man*, *Salvation* and *The Church*. Together, the Statement of Faith echoes aspects of Luckmann's description of church-oriented religion, providing a systematic and authoritative exposition of belief and practice with Answers in Genesis functioning as a mediator between the individuals who access their website and the sacred as outlined in the Statement of Faith.

On the face of it, the conflict the creationists engage in is articulated and fought on the basis of competing facts or interpretation of facts about nature and how they square with the respective interpretations of Scripture, i.e., it is argued in form of an epistemic (sometimes called 'epistemological'; Evans & Evans, 2008) conflict narrative.

To name merely two well-known examples, in young-earth creationism, geological strata and the fossil deposits they contain are not viewed as the result of a very long, continuous process of sedimentation ('uniformitarianism') but are interpreted mainly as the result of the Genesis Flood, which, according to a literalist reading of genealogical chapters in Genesis, occurred about 4400 years ago (Whitcomb & Morris, 1961: 391ff.; Kaden, 2019). In this case, the conflict is argued on the level of empirical geological and paleontological findings, the methods underlying their interpretation, and, to a certain extent, philosophy of science-based arguments about the reliability of scientific paradigms. The driving force behind the conflict is the perceived incompatibility of secular scientific findings in those areas with the interpretation of Scripture as accepted by the proponents of this variant of creationism.

In other variants of creationism, conflict appears in a similar form. Intelligent Design for the most part focuses on molecular biology at cell level (Behe, 1996; Meyer, 2009). Following a concept developed by Michael Behe, it aims to identify biochemical structures which it claims are irreducibly complex, i.e., could not have come about as a result of natural selection (Behe, 1996: 39–48). Irreducible complexity has been claimed by Intelligent Design proponents and criticized or debunked by their opponents for a number of biological structures such as the bacterial flagellum or the work of molecular machines inside cells. The conflict, then, takes on the same fact-centered form as the one young-earth creationism is involved in, and although Intelligent Design proponents argue that their motive has more to do with academic freedom and scholarly paradigmatic competition, it has been shown that there are religious motives in play (Forrest & Gross, 2004).

These examples, which only cover the well-researched fringes of public conflict positions in the anglophone West, exemplify an elective affinity between a focus on church religion and epistemic conflict positions. This is not surprising, as the main aspects of church religion as related by Luckmann are prime focal points of conflict in the accounts of those scholars and activists who argue in favor of an epistemic conflict. This situation has been analyzed by John Evans (Evans, 2018), who focuses on the institutional role and epistemic style of theologians and scientists, but his argument holds for representatives of religious and scientific institutions in general. His view is that any elite,[1] due to their understanding of their own role, are prone to regarding conflicts they are engaged in as conflicts over competing truth claims or "ways of knowing". Their aim will be to produce coherent systems of thought, particularly regarding the logical relationship between lower-level and higher-level truth claims, and to convict competing elites of failing to do so regarding the knowledge systems they hold.

Evans' description of the epistemic style of elites matches the conflict positions sketched above, but it also matches, not incidentally, Luckmann's description of the structured development, maintenance and transmission of religious belief systems he sees as characteristic for church-oriented religion. Without this systematic theological (or quasi-theological) view of the substance of religion as a coherent creed and

[1] To Evans, an elite is "anyone who has a social role that allows them to influence the views of other people beyond their immediate acquaintances and family members *on the issue under debate*" (Evans, 2008: 6; emphasis in original).

dogma, its logical points of friction with (parts of) other knowledge systems would be inexistent or irrelevant. A church-oriented religious position, then, seems to be the basis for at least some of the prominent public conflict debates surrounding science and religion. If this is correct then we would see a structurally different empirical situation where a different social form of religion is predominant.

The "New" Social Form of Religion: Religious Individualism

Luckmann's Perspective

In *The Invisible Religion*, Luckmann points out that what other scholars interpret as secularization in the sense of a general decline of religion is, in fact, the waning of one particular form—church-oriented religion—accompanied by the rise of another: individualized, privatized religion. "What are usually taken as symptoms of the decline of traditional Christianity may be symptoms of a more revolutionary change: the replacement of the institutional specialization of religion by a new social form of religion" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 84).

Before introducing this new social form, Luckmann develops his broader concept of personal identity. In his perspective, individual identity itself represents a universal form of individual religiosity: "The dominant themes in the modern sacred cosmos bestow something like a sacred status upon the individual by articulating his 'autonomy'" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 77). The uptake of a worldview during socialization as a "process […] is fundamentally religious. It rests on the universal anthropological condition of religion, individuation of consciousness, and conscience in social processes, and is actualized in the internalization of the configuration of meaning underlying a historical social order" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 31). With the weakening of institutionalized church forms, individuals increasingly shape their own religious meanings, aligning them with personal values, experiences, and existential concerns. This, Luckmann stresses, results in a religiosity that is "an increasingly 'subjective' and 'private' reality" (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 59).

Individualized religion, in his analysis, emphasizes personal spiritual experience rather than communal worship or formalized belief systems. Instead of relying on religious authorities or sacred texts, individuals seek direct experiences of transcendence through meditation, reflection, or private ritual. It is inherently flexible, adapting to personal growth rather than adhering to fixed traditions. Crucially, it lacks intermediaries: The individual establishes his own relation to "matters that 'count'" without the mediation of priests or official interpreters (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 99).

Though written in the 1960s, Luckmann's analysis anticipated many themes that remain salient today. He observes that modern religiosity confers a sacred status upon the individual, with biography itself becoming the primary locus of meaning (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 90). Mobility and achievement function as central motifs, linking self-realization to success while also encouraging retreat into private life when expectations prove limiting. Sexuality emerges as another privileged domain of significance, reinterpreted as a mode of self-expression rather than bound by collective regulation (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 100). Familism, though seemingly traditional,

likewise becomes an individual source of meaning rather than a reflection of a cosmic order (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 101). By contrast, themes such as death and old age recede into the background, underscoring the orientation toward youth and personal development (Luckmann, 2022 [1967]: 102). Ultimately, Luckmann concludes, modern individualized religion reflects a transformation in the relationship between the individual and society: meaning is increasingly sought in personal experiences rather than in institutionalized traditions.

Reverberations in Discourse

While Luckmann's description of religious individualization is somewhat dated, it has inspired later conceptual and empirical work, particularly in ethnography. The lived religion approach explicitly builds on this legacy by shifting the focus from institutions to everyday practices and embodied meanings (McGuire, 2008: 119–158). McGuire emphasizes that individuals construct religion by drawing on diverse cultural resources, creating bricolage constellations that serve biographical needs (McGuire, 2008: 97–118). A brief example is her vignette of Laura, a Latina woman in Texas, whose home altar combined Catholic heirlooms with crystals, incense, and popular cultural images (McGuire, 2008: 9–11). This illustrates how church-oriented elements coexist with non-traditional practices in individualized religiosity, underscoring that lived religion seldom maps neatly onto institutional categories.

Taken together, the adoption of a Luckmannian perspective in its entirety helps resolve the abovementioned issues regarding the perseverance of conflict narratives on science and religion in the public sphere. Comparing Luckmann's description of modern religiosity with the features of conflict narratives sketched in the prior section of this article, it is easy to notice a mismatch. Despite obvious personal preferences of some, and despite the natural continued existence of church-oriented religion alongside the "invisible" religion, it is not obvious how allegations that the New Atheists level against churches, their teachings and practices, would relate to religious individualists as described by Luckmann. The same holds true for the creationists' attempts to cast society beyond the confines of their institutional and doctrinal boundaries as irretrievably secular or anti-Christian. As shown, research designed to explore individual religion yields results that are at odds with strong epistemic conflict positions, because it lacks the imperative of epistemic coherence as pointed out by John Evans. Complementarily, research on the relationship between science and religion which does consider individualized forms of religious expression and which for the most part is qualitative in nature, reveals complex and unique sets of views that, if they include conflict positions, seldomly match onto common understandings.

In a qualitative research project, we encountered, among many others, Lyle Clinton, a sixty-seven-year-old man from Leicester, England, who embodies a deeply personal and unconventional approach to religion and science. Raised in a household where his mother was a member of the Church of England and his father a Marxist atheist, Clinton embraced Baptist beliefs in early adulthood but developed a strong opposition to formal religious institutions. Rejecting religious hierarchy, he insists that all individuals are ministers, dismissing clergy as fraudulent and organized religion as corrupt. His skepticism extends beyond religion to politics and science, view-

ing both as domains controlled by elites who manipulate truth for their own benefit. While he adheres to a literal interpretation of the Bible and questions evolutionary science, he distances himself from organized creationist movements, seeing them as part of the same institutional framework he fundamentally distrusts.

In contrast, Lara Appleton, a biology professor in Canada, represents a different expression of individualized belief. Raised in a non-religious household, Appleton identifies as agnostic and finds sufficient meaning in scientific explanations of life and nature. Unlike outspoken atheists who argue that science disproves religion, she adopts a pragmatic approach, respecting the personal beliefs of her students while maintaining that scientific knowledge should be the basis of academic learning. Her views on religion are shaped by personal experiences, including her father's strong anti-religious stance and a long-standing friendship with a creationist, which has led her to adopt a stance of mutual respect and coexistence. While rejecting traditional religious belief, she describes her connection to nature in almost spiritual terms, finding fulfillment and awe in the study of ecology (Jones & Kaden, 2020).

These cases illustrate how the lived religion approach as the heir of Luckmann's individualization thesis can show that individualized religious expression seldomly matches onto established categories of conflict and that bricolage is the norm rather than the exception. Moreover, and this goes beyond Luckmann's broad-brush essay, the individual religious constellations qualitative approaches unearth often display aspects of church religion alongside beliefs, practices and values that stem from outside the knowledge systems of religious institutions. This is the case in McGuire's cited reference case as well as in research focused directly on science-religion interaction.

Lastly, another area where Luckmann's pointer towards individualized forms of religion has led to fruitful empirical and conceptual developments is scholarship on the *Spiritual but Not Religious* (SBNR), which has significantly refined and expanded Luckmann's diagnosis, highlighting the processes of individualization and the turn toward subjective experience. Grace Davie's influential notion of *believing without belonging* (Davie, 1994) illustrates how religious faith increasingly detaches from institutional affiliation, thereby allowing individuals to select only those elements of belief that resonate with their personal worldview. Danièle Hervieu-Léger's theory of *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) deepens this point: as the collective memory maintained by religious institutions weakens, individuals increasingly experience "the pluralization, subjectivization and individualization of systems of meaning" (2000: 30). This weakening of institutionalized dogma, traditionally a major source of conflict with scientific worldviews, creates space for forms of religiosity that, due to their lack of aspiration to engage in systematic world explanation, see no need to engage in (allegedly or factually) opposing systems, such as science.

Equally important is the SBNRs' emphasis on subjective experience and inner authority. Heelas and Woodhead's *Spiritual Revolution* (2005) argues that contemporary spirituality rests on a "sacralization of unique subjectivities" (2005: 31), privileging inner well-being and personal meaning-making over external authority. Mercadante's qualitative study *Beliefs without Borders* (2014) similarly shows that SBNRs tend to reject literalist interpretations of sacred texts and punitive images of God in favor of fluid, eclectic, and highly individualized theologies. In Hervieu-

Léger's typology, such seekers and converts represent a form of religiosity that is not bound to inherited dogma but is reinvented in ways compatible with modern life. Taken together, these perspectives help explain why individualized religion, in its SBNR variants, is generally less prone to clash with science: because it is grounded in personal experience rather than propositional truth-claims, it neither competes with nor negates scientific accounts of the world.

Against this backdrop, the notion of epistemic conflict that is diagnosed using classifications that presuppose a relationship of representation between church-oriented religion and individual religious expression becomes questionable, since the presupposed link may not be paradigmatic despite elements of church-oriented religion clearly being present.

Conclusion

This article introduced Luckmann's concept of social forms of religion to the debate surrounding the persistence of science-religion conflict narratives despite their historical inaccuracies. Many reasons have already been unearthed by historians and sociologists, among them institutional power plays, the epistemic styles of elites, and the functions of media discourse (Aechtner, 2021).

At the same time, empirical social research has broadened and started to explore a wide range of approaches and attitudes toward the subject. These partly align with a church-oriented understanding of religion and partly with an individualized understanding of religion. Epistemic conflict positions are not entirely absent in individualized constellations. However, they do not arise from the mere fact of religiosity or affiliation with a religious institution itself, but rather as an effect of an individual biographical constellation through which certain bodies of knowledge are rendered relevant. In this sense, current historical research on conflict positions such as that held by Andrew Dickson White (see introductory section) aligns with the revised sociological research that is based on an individual-religious paradigm. Both place conflict narratives, to the extent that they exist at all, within the frame of the individual biographical context.

By situating the persistence of conflict narratives within Luckmann's framework of changing social forms of religion, this article has shown that the perceived incompatibility of science and religion is not inherent but arises under specific institutional and historical conditions. While church-oriented religion, with its systematic creeds and institutional authority, has often provided fertile ground for epistemic conflict, individualized forms of religiosity tend to operate outside such arenas and therefore rarely generate similar tensions. Recognizing this distinction shifts the debate: rather than asking whether science and religion are "in conflict," scholars are better served by examining which forms of religion are at stake, under what conditions, and with what consequences. This broader sociological perspective not only helps to explain the resilience of the conflict thesis in public discourse but also opens space for more nuanced accounts of the diverse ways in which religion and science interact in contemporary societies.

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Declarations

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